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Misclassification on the Mekong: the origins of Hun Sen's personalist dictatorship

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ABSTRACT

Authoritarian regime datasets are an important tool for research in both comparative politics and international relations. Despite widespread use of these categorization schemes, very little attention has been paid to the quality of the judgements contained within them. Using the unambiguous case of Cambodia, this article demonstrates how leading datasets have failed to capture the manifest features of Hun Sen's personalist dictatorship. This is demonstrated by the unconstrained and discretionary authority he wields across six domains of control. In addition to reclassifying Cambodia as a party-personalist regime, this article raises questions about the reliability of classification judgements for more opaque authoritarian regimes. The article has implications for existing and ongoing research into whether personalist dictatorships will undergo democratization, initiate interstate war, and commit repression.

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Introduction

The effort to categorize authoritarian regimes has become an influential strand of research in comparative politics. The resulting datasets have provided a foundation for theoretical insights into the relationship between different types of authoritarian regimes and the effectiveness of foreign aid, occurrence of civil war, onset of interstate war, probability of democratization, risk of nuclear proliferation and use of repression.¹ Despite widespread use, scant attention has been paid to the accuracy of the judgements contained within these categorization schemes. Any assessments that do occur tend to be informal descriptions of their similarities and differences, rather than formal appraisals of how certain authoritarian regimes are classified. Since coding decisions are typically made by comparativist scholars or graduate students with generalist knowledge, rather than country experts with specialist knowledge, the risk of misclassification is omnipresent. This problem is underscored by the case of Cambodia under Hun Sen – an authoritarian regime erroneously classified as lacking personalist characteristics.

This article draws attention to the problem of classifying authoritarian regimes and, in particular, personalist dictatorships. Since dictators rarely banish the institution from

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whence they came, Svolik claims that “it is particularly difficult to objectively ascertain the occurrence and timing of a transition from a military or single-party dictatorship to a personalist one”.² In the case of Cambodia, the leading datasets have classified it as a limited multi-party regime, civilian dictatorship, electoral autocracy, and party-based regime.³ Such classifications, it is argued, fail to capture the politically salient features of Hun Sen’s personalism, which exists in conjunction with the dominance of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP). His unconstrained and discretionary authority is demonstrated across six domains: gatekeeping of the process by which people are appointed to high office; appointment of relatives to high-level posts in the party, military, or government; creation of a paramilitary group outside the normal chain of military command; control of the security apparatus; monopoly of the decision-making process within the party executive committee; and management of who enters and exits that committee. Ultimately, a more accurate judgement should classify Cambodia as a party-personalist regime. The fact that such an unambiguous case has been misclassified raises questions about the capacity of leading datasets to properly classify more opaque authoritarian regimes.

This article proceeds by first describing the general features of personalist dictatorships. The aim here is to delineate the design, behaviour, and durability of them in a way that contextualizes how an increasing number of dictators have been able to personalize power. The second section examines the misclassified case of Cambodia. Using the descriptive method, it offers an account of how Hun Sen long ago personalized power across six domains.⁴ Despite uneven progress on each, the third section fixes the date of Cambodia’s transition from a party-based regime to a party-personalist regime to 2005. The conclusion considers the implications of such misclassification for different research strands in comparative politics and international relations.

The nature of personalist dictatorships

The growth of personalism in Cambodia is symptomatic of a broader trend. Between 1989 and 2010, the number of personalist dictatorships around the world increased from 23% to 42% of all authoritarian regimes.⁵ By way of a definition, the former denotes a “regime where discretion over personnel, policy and the distribution of rewards is concentrated in the hands of one individual, who can be either a civilian or military official”.⁶ In such a situation, the dictator has consolidated enough power that he can no longer be credibly threatened with rebellion by members of the ruling coalition – the “set of people who support a dictator and, jointly with him, hold enough power to guarantee a regime’s survival”.⁷ Before outlining how Cambodia’s Hun Sen personalized power, this section describes the general nature of such dictatorships.

The impression of invincibility held by personal dictators is the sum of a sustained campaign to amass greater power. Yet the lone ascent of one individual at the expense of many individuals faces a structural impediment – the ruling coalition surrounding the dictator can threaten to rebel as a check on his opportunism. Since this group is an outgrowth of the group that took office, the dictator is nothing more than “first among equals”. In exchange for supporting him, members of the ruling coalition are rewarded with business contracts, government positions, landholdings, monetary payments, prominent party posts, and other perks. The persistent problem, however, is information asymmetry: “The absence of binding limits and institutional checks on the dictator”,

Geddes, Wright, and Frantz show, “creates opportunities for the dictator to abuse his supporters in ways that members of this seizure group seldom seem to anticipate *ex ante*”.⁸ This is illustrative of how the power-sharing arrangements within authoritarian regimes are inherently unstable, because they are not subject to independent adjudication. An indisputable sign of breakdown is the coups that oust dictators, which occur more frequently than all other exit modes combined. An alternative scenario, however, is when dictators accumulate enough power to resist rebellion by their ruling coalition.

The onset of personalist dictatorship signifies the collapse of the contested power-sharing arrangement that characterizes authoritarian regimes. How does this happen? Why did the ruling coalition not stop him? The first problem is coordination. Since these individuals have less information about the actions of the dictator, their monitoring of him is imperfect. This makes it harder to punish him should he choose to bend or break the existing power-sharing agreement. The second problem is resources. Owing to his position at the apex of official and unofficial revenue streams, the dictator can use the money at his disposal to co-opt select members of the ruling coalition through a “divide-and-rule” strategy. The third problem is capability. Since security services often report to the dictator, he maintains a coercive advantage compared to the ruling coalition (or almost all members of it). This is usually supplemented – as the case of Cambodia will reveal – by his control of a paramilitary group of some kind. The final problem is probability. In the event members of the winning coalition decide to rebel against the dictator, there is no guarantee of success (especially if they do not have the support of military officials). On the one hand, participation in a failed coup carries the risk of being purged by the dictator, which means trading all the perks of office for house arrest, prison, or death. The ill-fated coups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2011), Sudan (2012), Chad (2013), Gambia (2014) and Burkina Faso (2015) are recent examples of members of different ruling coalitions attempting to oust established personalist dictators. On the other hand, participation in a successful coup still carries the risk of regime collapse, because it forces incumbent elites to either negotiate new bargains or capitalize on the state of flux. The ability of the ruling coalition to actually halt the rise of a personalist dictator is thus fraught with difficulty.

Despite the above problems, most ruling coalitions still attempt to curb the aspirations of personalist dictators. What matters most is whether successive power grabs are denied or permitted. This is important because the outcome of these contests determines whether the threat of elite rebellion is credible. After his party lost Venezuela’s 2015 election, for instance, Nicolas Maduro forced his cabinet ministers to resign on mass and secured broad new authority over the legislature.⁹ This example reveals how difficult it is for incumbent elites to prevent power grabs, even those made openly. In the event the personalist dictator consolidates enough power, it is a sign that the ruling coalition is tangential to his survival. “He is free to break agreements (or not to make them in the first place)”, Jackson and Rosberg explain, “Because those with whom he may have them are in no position to enforce them. There are no powerful rivals with whom he must contend.”¹⁰ Having personalized power, the dictator must next determine how he will maintain it.

The nature of personalist dictatorships means power is maintained in contrasting and sometimes contradictory ways. Since the structure of each regime is a reflection of individual preferences, there are few commonalities between them. Some personalist

dictators, such as Hun Sen in Cambodia, adopt very sophisticated institutional assemblages based around elections, legislatures, and parties.¹¹ A common goal is to not only block the formation of a cohesive elite group intent on rebellion, but also prevent any individual from developing an autonomous power base by fostering uncertainty. The enduring value of these institutions is their capacity to help with the collection of information, provision of legitimacy, management of elites, and distribution of patronage.¹² A similar logic informs how personalist dictators control the military, which poses an imminent threat due to its capacity to initiate a coup. The more common tactics include subdividing its forces, creating paramilitary groups, stationing less-than-loyal troops at a geographic distance, deciding on promotions, and forcing retirement upon high-ranking officers.¹³ This reliance on institutional complexity is contrasted with the approaches of other personalist dictators, many of whom have discarded institutions altogether. In Equatorial Guinea, for instance, Francisco Nguema eliminated the cabinet, civil service, elections, and national assembly for fear they would all empower his adversaries; choosing instead to rule through high intensity repression and a personality cult.¹⁴ Despite its widespread adoption in the past, this strategy of ruling without institutions is less common today.

Another strategy personalist dictators employ to maintain power is the upkeep of patron–client ties. This refers to an ‘instrumental exchange process whereby the dictator provides benefits, protection and/or services to people who, for their part, reciprocate by offering him assistance and/or support’.¹⁵ Once just a feature of traditional patrimonial regimes, this mode of social organization has been grafted onto the modern state. Drawing from a myriad of personalist dictatorships in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Bratton and van de Walle highlight the enduring presence of “hybrid political systems in which the customs and patterns of patrimonialism co-exist with, and suffuse, rational legal institutions”.¹⁶ This arrangement, which is known as neopatrimonialism, is best understood as a mix of two different modes of political domination. In the view of Erdmann and Engel:

The exercise of power in neopatrimonial regimes is erratic and unpredictable, as opposed to the calculable exercise of power embedded in universal values ... Public norms under neopatrimonialism are formal and rational, but their social practice of often personal and informal.¹⁷

This dualism produces a wide variety of intermediate situations capable of accommodating personalist dictators, including Cambodia’s Hun Sen. At one end of the spectrum are regulated neopatrimonial regimes characterized by an inclusive patrimonialism revolving around redistribution. At the other end are purely predatory neopatrimonial regimes that correspond to an exclusionary sultanistic type of patrimonialism. So while personalist dictators who occupy neopatrimonial regimes still resort to extensive repression, they also use patronage to co-opt elites and citizens. This has the effect of building greater support for personal rule.

The vagaries of personalist dictatorships raise questions about their durability. In comparative terms, they have a failure rate far lower than military regimes, but slightly higher than party-based regimes. This resilience is particularly pronounced in neopatrimonial regimes, where the dictator can utilize extensive patrimonial ties to withstand opposition movements pushing for change.¹⁸ The comparative weak point of them is their design. Since they are built to serve a single individual, leadership succession is either an unconscionable or mismanaged exercise. The absence of a regularized method to remove the dictator encourages marginalized elites and disgruntled citizens

to oust him using irregular means, such as assassination or revolution. This underscores the strong relationship that has been found to exist between different types of authoritarian regimes and the risk of coups.¹⁹ Personalist dictators such as Hun Sen are far more likely to end up being killed, jailed, or exiled than the leaders of strictly military or party regimes, regardless of whether regime change occurs. The saving grace for dictators at the head of hybrid amalgamations, such as party-personalist regimes, is that they have an institution that can help protect their interests. This diminishes the probability of irregular removal. The historical record shows that there have only been a handful of personalist dictators who have escaped this fate via leadership succession – including Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen. The truth is that personalist dictatorships rarely last beyond their founder.

This article has so far focused on the general design, behaviour, and durability of personalist dictatorships. The goal was to describe a phenomenon that has captured the attention of scholars, leading to the development of a rich body of scholarship. Despite being a subject of sustained enquiry, the conceptually incommensurable aspects of authoritarian politics make it difficult to identify the onset of personalist dictatorships. The next section nevertheless takes up this task in relation to Cambodia. It argues for a reclassification of how the regime is coded by leading datasets on authoritarian politics.

The case of Cambodia matters because it represents an “easy” test for existing categorization schemes. This is owing to three important factors. First, Hun Sen has concentrated power across all six domains of control; which runs counter to the claim that the personalization of dictatorial rule seldom fully occurs.²⁰ This means his personalism was a manifest feature perceptible to comparativist scholars, rather than a latent feature that could escape observation. Second, the personalization process occurred over the course of two decades. Not only was it far slower than what has been observed in other cases, but scholars had ample opportunity to measure it. Third, Cambodian politics are relatively transparent by the standards of authoritarian regimes. The *Cambodia Daily* and *Phnom Penh Post* have long reported on corruption allegations, government appointments, party meetings, and the use of the security apparatus. This is supplemented by an extensive list of country experts documenting Hun Sen’s consolidation of power, especially in regional journals such as *Asian Survey* and *Southeast Asian Affairs*. In sum, there was nothing ambiguous about how Cambodia under Hun Sen should have been classified. The fact that it was nevertheless misclassified raises doubts about the classification of “hard” tests, such as the reclusive regimes in Eritrea, North Korea, and Turkmenistan.

Hun Sen’s personalization of power

The 1979 overthrow of Democratic Kampuchea created the political vacuum for Hun Sen’s emergence.²¹ Having joined the communist rebellion in 1970, he rose quickly through its ranks to become a deputy commander of a Special Forces regiment. By 1977, however, widespread purges within the Khmer Rouge led him to defect to Vietnam, where he was imprisoned. After winning over his captors, Hun Sen was given the responsibility of forming an exile force to participate in the impending invasion of Cambodia. Upon its success, he was appointed to the small and powerful politburo charged with running the country on behalf of Vietnam. After the death of Chan Sy in 1985, Hun Sen was installed by the Vietnamese as prime minister. Over time he

would use this position to amass a level of power unsurpassed by any leader of modern Cambodia.

The story of Cambodia under Hun Sen belies how it is classified by existing datasets. How did this happen? The *Authoritarian Regimes* dataset (of Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius) rejects personalism as a distinct category on the grounds that such a trait is shared by all dictatorships to varying degrees. The *Democracy-Dictatorship* dataset (of Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland) insists personalism is irrelevant because civilians cannot rely on family and kin networks or seek support from the armed forces – leading them to rely on a political party. Somewhat differently, the *Political Regimes* dataset (of Kailitz and Stockemer) defines a personalist autocracy as the absence of popular competitive elections. Finally, the *Autocratic Regimes* dataset (of Geddes, Wright, and Frantz) uses an outdated source to classify Cambodia as a party-based regime. This article takes issue with such classification judgements, which are either too exclusionary or factually incorrect. Not only is Hun Sen's personalism the dominant characteristic of a regime reliably underpinned by both family loyalty and military cooperation, but competitive elections are indispensable to the CPP's dominance.

To make this argument, the following section accounts for the manifest features of Hun Sen's personalism. Utilizing the original framework of Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, which captures how a dictator concentrates power at the expense of a ruling coalition, it draws attention to six domains: appointments, relatives, paramilitary, security, rubber stamp, and party executive.²² The key benefit of this framework is that it captures *observable* behaviour; meaning it offers a solution to the problem of objectively ascertaining the emergence of a personalist regime. Afterwards, the conclusion addresses the implications of this article for existing research on democratization, interstate war, and repression.

Gatekeeping of appointments to high office

A pronounced feature of Hun Sen's personalism is his status as a gatekeeper of appointments to high office. This is actually a power bequeathed by Cambodia's neopatrimonial mode of domination, whereby the traditional informality of personal relationships trumps the legal-rational formality of state institutions.²³ Alongside the longstanding practice of appointing loyalists to military and police posts, Hun Sen has repeatedly tied positions of power to loyalty to him. Using elections, he routinely co-opts opposition candidates into the ruling party with the promise of not only large sums of money and expensive goods, but postings in various ministries.²⁴ Following the 2003 election, for instance, he oversaw the appointment of 7 deputy prime ministers, 15 senior ministers, 28 ministers, 135 secretaries of state, and 146 undersecretaries of state across 26 ministries.²⁵ Such characteristic behaviour is indicative of how interwoven patronage is with the political system, which is characterized in large part by the flow of money and a respect for hierarchy.

The more notable representation of Hun Sen's control in this domain, however, is the *oknha* honorific bestowed on his closest supporters. Traditionally a title of nobility bestowed by the king, this title was resurrected in April 1994 for an individual who donates more than US\$100,000 to the state for the purpose of "national development". Since the state is indistinguishable from the party, however, the *oknha* system is better understood as a slush fund for CPP election campaigns and a loyalty programme for Hun Sen. Initially composed of just a few individuals, the size of this group is estimated

to comprise over 700 people today.²⁶ A list of some prominent members includes Kith Meng (President of the Cambodia Chamber of Commerce), Lim Bunheng (President of the Cambodian Rice Exports Association), Men Sarun (Senator), Mong Reththy (Senator), and Si Kong Triv (Senator). Besides offering stoic support to the CPP, many *oknha* also serve as personal aides to Hun Sen. They do not offer policy guidance per se, but gain access to him based on their largesse. After the 2013 election, for example, 55 *oknha* became “personal advisers” or “personal assistants” to him.²⁷ This practice is a manifestation of Hun Sen’s status as a gatekeeper determining not only appointments to high office, but business contracts, landholdings, party posts, or other perks. Such is the nature of his personal control.

Appointment of relatives to high-level posts

Another way Hun Sen has concentrated power is through the recurring appointment of his relatives to high-level posts. The capacity to do so is once again a product of Cambodia’s neopatrimonial tradition, but also the information (and, thus, coordination) advantages he retains relative to the ruling coalition. Soon after taking office, he appointed his brother, Hun Neng, to be the Governor of Kompong Cham and a member of the CPP’s Central Executive Committee. In 2013, Hun Neng was appointed the Chairman of the Commission of Interior, National Defence, Investigation, Anti-Corruption and Public Function of the National Assembly. This effectively allowed any official allegations of corruption against anyone under Hun Sen’s umbrella of protection to be quashed via bureaucratic formalities and legislative procedure. There is also the case of his eldest son, Hun Manet, who commands the National Counter-Terrorism Special Forces. The same logic has evidently guided the appointment of other family members. His middle son, Hun Manith, is the Commander of the Defence Ministry’s Intelligence Department, while his youngest son, Hun Many, currently heads the CPP’s defacto youth organization and serves in the National Assembly. Such prominent posts provide these men a platform to eventually succeed their father – a rare event for personalist dictators. In contrast to the other indicators of personalization, many of which are at the mercy of opaque intra-elite politics, Hun Sen’s nepotism is always on full display.

The barefaced nature of Hun Sen’s nepotism also extends throughout the upper echelons of the ruling party, military, police, and business community. It constitutes a sprawling network consummated by a web of politically auspicious marriages. A brief survey reveals that Hun Sen’s oldest daughter, Hun Mana, is married to the director of the Central Security Department, Dy Vichea; his youngest daughter, Hun Mali, is married to Sok Puthyvuth, the son of Sok An, the powerful Chairman of Council of Ministers; his niece, Hun Kimleng, is married to the Commissioner of National Police, Neth Savoeun; and his nephew, Hun Seang Heng, is married to Sok Sopheak, the daughter of the Deputy Commissioner of National Police, Sok Phal. Such uniform examples are indicative of Hun Sen’s unconstrained power vis-à-vis the ruling coalition. They speak to a broader pattern of personal consolidation.

Creation of paramilitary group

An unequivocal example of Hun Sen’s control is his creation and management of paramilitary groups. During the 1980s and early 1990s, he was just one of many Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party (KPRP) officials who employed a handful of

bodyguards for protection from the various groups resisting Vietnamese occupation.²⁸ The number of paramilitary groups in Cambodia expanded significantly before and during the intervention of the United Nations, whereby designated “A-Teams” and “T-Groups” committed widespread abuses under ministerial level instructions and on behalf of the CPP.²⁹ Following the 1994 coup plot (detailed below), Hun Sen became utterly obsessive with his security. Amidst a general reorganization of security forces, which began within months, he turned his own security detail into an elaborate network of “intervention units”.³⁰ While many groups were reintegrated into standard police and military units, many others were redeployed to provide him with a constant circle of protection. This included the establishment of Brigade 70 in October 1994. The flagrant creation of a Praetorian Guard was once again executed without consequence from the ruling coalition. The ensuing years only served to further solidify the loyalty of soldiers and chain of command. Today, Hun Sen exercises direct or indirect control over the National Counter-Terrorism Special Forces (commanded by his son, Hun Manet); the 2000-strong Intervention Brigade 70 (led by his ally, Mao Sophan, for over two decades); the 4500-strong Paratrooper Special Forces Brigade 911 (commanded by loyalist Chap Pheakdey); the 8000-strong Gendarmerie Police (deployed nationwide); and a 3000-strong Bodyguard Unit (the country’s best-equipped fighting force).³¹ Ultimately, the most definitive marker of how Hun Sen has personalized power is the wanton transformation of his security detail, which numbered around 60 bodyguards in the mid-1990s, into a paramilitary architecture equivalent in size to the national militaries of Senegal, Somalia, or Zambia.

Control over the security apparatus

The precarious transition from war to peace in Cambodia initially prevented Hun Sen from assuming control of the security apparatus. The Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Armed Forces was itself a creation of Vietnam, which meant its leaders were politically and organizationally loyal to the mother country.³² This lack of space to seize control was compounded by the ongoing civil war between the ruling KPRP and various resistance groups, including notably the Khmer Rouge. The first real opportunity for Hun Sen came via the implementation of the 1991 Paris Peace Accord, which aimed to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate these warring factions into the new Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF). Since the Khmer Rouge refused to participate, however, the new military quickly became factionalized. While those forces loyal to the CPP – the successor to the KPRP – maintained military preponderance, those vehemently opposed to it constituted at least 40% of the RCAF.³³ This effectively meant Hun Sen had no way of unilaterally controlling the armed forces in the early 1990s.

During this same period, Hun Sen nevertheless managed to seize control of the Cambodian National Police. Another creation of Vietnamese authorities, the institution had traditionally been tightly controlled and harshly wielded by the Ministry of the Interior. In July 1994, however, an alleged coup attempt to overthrow the bipartisan government provided Hun Sen with the pretext required to consolidate more power. Since the conspiracy involved no less than the former Interior Minister Sin Song and the National Police Chief Sin Sen, Hun Sen used it to move against his longstanding factional rivals within the ruling party.³⁴ The specific targets were Interior Minister Sar Kheng and CPP President Chea Sim. Implying they had prior knowledge of the coup plot, Hun Sen demanded that he appoint the next national police chief. After they reluctantly

acquiesced, he selected Hok Lundy, a loyal ally since their days together as defectors of the Khmer Rouge in Vietnam. When coupled with the fact the new police chief would report directly to Hun Sen (rather than the interior minister), it was a crucial power grab that went unchecked by the ruling coalition. "It was the decisive turning point," Strangio astutely notes, "Backed by ruthless force, Hun Sen now had the clout to reshape the Cambodian political landscape to his liking."³⁵

This became evident when Hun Sen initiated a coup against his coalition partner in July 1997. After the 1993 election, which was administered by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, the defeated CPP coerced its way into a power-sharing deal with the victorious United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC). The centrepiece of this tenuous arrangement involved splitting executive power between First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Second Prime Minister Hun Sen. The ensuing years were marked by nothing less than widespread derision, distrust, and destabilization. The situation eventually forced Prince Ranariddh to court political alliances with various opposition parties and defectors, such as the Khmer Rouge.³⁶ When Hun Sen learned of the imminent formation of a broad opposition coalition, he ordered security forces loyal to him to oust FUNCINPEC.³⁷ The key detail here is that Hun Sen's coup was executed *without* the support of the most senior members of the ruling coalition. This included Chea Sim and Sar Kheng, but also Defence Minister Tea Banh and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Ke Kim Yan.³⁸ Many of them stated publically that there should be no confrontation between the CPP and FUNCINPEC, a demand underscored by their subsequent lack of operational support. To pull off the coup, Hun Sen instead utilized his private bodyguard units, loyal army factions, gendarmerie police (under recently empowered ally Hok Lundy), and Khmer Rouge defectors. This is illustrative of just how important the design of coercive institutions is to dictators; they must be capable of defending against both threats from the population and threats from elites.³⁹ In this way, Hun Sen's prior capture of the Cambodian National Police and other paramilitary forces was sufficient for the 1997 coup. In addition to revealing the benefits of controlling a diffuse set of smaller forces over one monolithic national force, Hun Sen's coup constituted yet another power grab unchecked by the ruling coalition.

The final power grab within this domain occurred more than a decade later. In January 2009, Armed Forces Commander in Chief Ke Kim Yan was removed from his post by a royal decree signed by King Norodom Sihamoni, but on the recommendation of Hun Sen.⁴⁰ This occurred less than two months after the death of National Police Chief Hok Lundy in a helicopter crash, which diluted the capacity of the police to serve as Hun Sen's counterfoil to the military. The swift termination of Ke Kim Yan, which left several members of the ruling coalition dumbfounded, actually marked the end of a sustained effort to remove the commander. Despite unsuccessfully opposing Hun Sen on numerous occasions, he had been able to maintain his position due to the support of Chea Sim and because he was extremely popular amongst armed forces personnel. This footing proved to be less effective as time passed. In a demonstration of personal control, Hun Sen replaced Ke Kim Yan with General Pol Saroeun, a staunch ally since they served together as rebel leaders opposed to the Khmer Rouge.⁴¹ This was followed by Hun Sen's de-facto appointment of seven deputy chiefs, notably Kun Kim (former chief of his bodyguard unit), Sao Sokha (former bodyguard and gendarmerie police commander), and Hing Bunheang (current chief of his bodyguard unit).⁴² All seven appointees were known to be

extremely loyal to Hun Sen. Beyond any doubt, this power grab signified that the ruling coalition could no longer credibly threaten to rebel against him. At the same time, however, it made it more likely that Hun Sen's eventual removal from power – if it occurs – will come via marginalized elites and disgruntled citizens using irregular means, such as assassination or revolution.

Monopoly of the decision-making process within the party executive committee

Another way Hun Sen has concentrated power at the expense of the ruling coalition is by monopolizing the decision-making process of the CPP's executive committee. In contrast to the other indicators, however, personalization of this domain is a recent achievement. During the 1980s and 1990s, Hun Sen's decision-making authority was more subject to entrenched factional differences and the popularity of the CPP. At the February 1997 party congress, for example, Hun Sen's selfishness and outspokenness was openly criticized by senior party and military officials, who urged him to work more with the party ahead of commune and national elections.⁴³ The key event in this respect occurred in July 2004. On this occasion the CPP was trying to forge a coalition government with FUNCINPEC following the 2003 election, which would have required approval by the party executive committee. After a long political stalemate, Hun Sen lured Prince Ranariddh into an agreement by adding 160 new positions to the cabinet, creating hundreds more at the district and provincial levels, providing a new helicopter, and returning a seized private jet.⁴⁴ To formalize the deal, which required a tricky legislative manoeuvre, King Sihanouk's signature was required. However, when he refused to return from North Korea, the task was left to senate president and acting head of state, Chea Sim. From here, authorization should have been straightforward. To widespread surprise, however, Hun Sen's longstanding factional rival abstained from approving it, allegedly because it was unfavourable to many of his subordinates.⁴⁵ This reportedly enraged Hun Sen.⁴⁶ After conferring with other members of the ruling coalition, he had riot police – commanded by Hok Lundy – surround Chea Sim's residence, escort him to the airport and put him on a plane to Thailand. This blatant power grab by Hun Sen, which conveyed he had a monopoly on the decision-making process within the party executive committee, was sealed by the signing of the controversial amendment by Chea Sim's deputy. "The humiliating episode", Strangio evaluated, "capped off the erosion of his power since the mid-1980s and cemented Hun Sen at the apex of both party and government".⁴⁷ This remains the case today.

Management of party executive committee membership

The control Hun Sen has exerted over the decision-making process of the CPP's executive committee portends his management of its membership. In this regard, his personal control actually extends as far back as the 1980s, when he used a succession of party congresses to secure positions for scores of loyal cadres.⁴⁸ Such incremental membership stacking was initially designed to target the pro-Vietnam faction led by Pen Sovann, Chea Soth, and Bou Thang, but it soon subtly overwhelmed the Chea Sim faction. Since almost all of these cadres still count themselves as Hun Sen's most loyal allies – be it Tea Banh (Defence Minister), Chea Chanto (Governor of National Bank of

Cambodia), Ngoun Nhel (Vice President of National Assembly), or Som Kim Suor (National Audit Authority General Director) – personalizing the executive committee membership process has obviously been beneficial to him. Yet Hun Sen’s management of this critical party organ is today devoid of anything resembling incrementalism or subtlety. Over the course of his leadership, the size of the CPP’s central committee has increased from 45 to 545 members, while its standing committee (or politburo) has increased from nine to 34 members.⁴⁹ A recent batch of new members includes dozens of security force commanders who have been implicated in serious human rights abuses.⁵⁰ The elevation of the five most senior commanders of the national gendarmerie, which was used to suppress the 2014 garment workers strike, shared many similarities with the promotion of commanders from Regiment 911 and the Judicial Police Department of the Ministry of Interior, which helped engineer the 1997 coup. Together they are indicative of Hun Sen’s longstanding strategy of rewarding those who demonstrate personal loyalty with standing committee posts and, crucially, immunity from criminal prosecution. This is a firm sign of his personal control.

Cambodia: a party-personalist regime

Having described how personalization proceeded in Cambodia, the final task is to timestamp when the regime went from being a party-based type to a party-personalist type. In accordance with the classification scheme of Geddes, this hybrid amalgamation can be defined as an authoritarian regime in which an individual leader and a political party share similar – yet variable – levels of discretion over personnel, policy, and the distribution of rewards.⁵¹ Identifying the existence of such an arrangement is difficult due to the fact each regime type measures a conceptually distinct aspect of authoritarian politics. An immediate issue is whether some aspects of the personalization process, such as the creation of a paramilitary group or control over the security apparatus, should be weighted more importantly than other aspects. Another issue is whether to mark the emergence of Hun Sen’s personal dictatorship according to his control of a majority (four) or all (six) of the relevant domains. The answers provided to these questions are important because they have an inordinate effect on any revised timestamp. By way of comparison, Geddes et al. code personalist dictatorships using a *majority* of equally weighted domains. Since this article is critiquing the conventional classification of Cambodia, however, it will code Hun Sen’s personal dictatorship using *all* equally weighted domains. In other words, a tougher threshold has been self-imposed.

This article argues that Hun Sen’s personalist dictatorship began in 2005. Since he inherited the power to act as a gatekeeper of appointments to high office and appoint his relatives to high-level posts, the remaining four domains were consolidated over the course of two decades (see [Figure 1](#)). The final power grab occurred in January 2005. Having repeatedly crushed, demoralized, and outmanoeuvred the Chea Sim faction, Hun Sen appointed seven loyalists to the CPP’s standing committee. This represented the largest and most anomalous increase in its membership since the ruling party was established. Importantly, while Hun Sen still probably consults with senior party officials on such appointments, he is the only individual who retains a veto over those decisions. In June 2015, Hun Sen’s power over appointments was formalized by his “election” as the new CPP president, which took place via a party ballot that listed him as the only candidate.⁵² This was further evidence of how members of the ruling

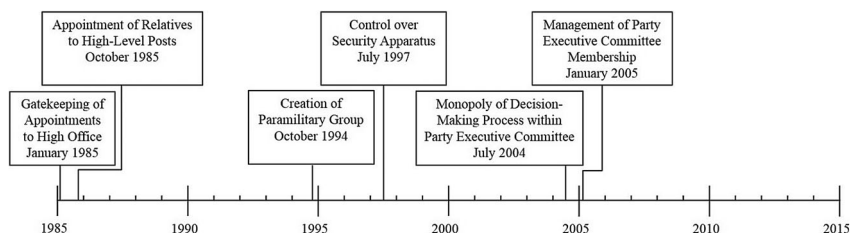


Figure 1. Timeline of Hun Sen's personalization.

coalition can no longer credibly threaten him with rebellion; especially in a way that once made them necessary and sufficient for the regime's survival.

The extent of Hun Sen's personalism raises questions about the level of control retained by the CPP. Has Hun Sen consolidated enough power to make it a hollowed-out institution now purely designed to serve his ambitions? In what way is it important to accessing office, controlling policy, and distributing rewards? Should Cambodia actually be reclassified as a pure personalist type of authoritarian regime? This article argues that Cambodia's ruling party remains relevant. Since it is currently the only institution capable of participating in periodic elections, it remains essential to providing Hun Sen with a legal basis for maintaining power as prime minister. This of course applies to national elections, but also commune elections, which have repeatedly provided the CPP with a near monopoly of control over local administration. In addition, the ruling party is the only actor capable of coordinating the nationwide exchange of patronage – for example, development projects, material goods, and specialized services – for votes during elections.⁵³ When combined with its performance narrative, this provides the ruling party – and, thus, Hun Sen – with a necessary degree of political legitimacy, especially in the rural countryside.⁵⁴ Such added value will prove to be extremely beneficial should Hun Sen attempt to engineer a political succession to one of his sons.

The overall picture to emerge is of an authoritarian regime characterized by Hun Sen's personal control of the political system (including members of the ruling coalition), but in a way that does not diminish the CPP's relative dominance within that system. His personalism is a manifest feature of authoritarian rule, while the ruling party is a latent institution whose importance varies according to the date of the electoral calendar. The success of this symbiosis means Cambodia should be classified as a party-personalist regime.

Conclusion

This article critiqued the conventional classification of Cambodia as exclusively a party-based or electoral-based authoritarian regime. Instead, it argued that the existing categorization schemes had failed to account for the manifest features of Hun Sen's personalism. This control was evident in the way he acted as a gatekeeper for political positions, appointed his relatives, created a paramilitary group, controlled the security apparatus, exercised a monopoly on decision-making, and managed membership of the party executive. Using a high threshold, this article reclassified Cambodia as a party-personalist regime from 2005 onwards. The remainder of this conclusion addresses

the implications of the article for research on democratization, interstate war, and repression.

The relationship between various types of authoritarian regimes and democratization has been the subject of renewed enquiry. Scholars have shown how personalist regimes that allow competitive elections are more likely to undergo democratization, while those that sanction legislatures and parties are less likely.⁵⁵ The contradictions here are striking. Assuming it is accurately classified, for example, Cambodia would simultaneously be a most likely and a least likely case for democratization. The same goes for Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Gambia, Kazakhstan, Russia, Togo, Uganda, and Yemen. This is extremely unhelpful for the civil society groups and international organizations that invest their resources in fostering democratic change. Given that the primary goal of this research strand is to understand how different institutional arrangements affect the trajectories of authoritarian regimes, agreement on the nature of the regime should be a precondition.

An equally rich research strand has examined the relationship between authoritarian regimes and interstate war. This includes how personalist dictatorships are the most war-prone type amongst all authoritarian regimes, but also in relation to challenging democracies.⁵⁶ In another way, it has shown how the war-proneness of authoritarian regimes varies according to whether they are classified as bosses, juntas, machines, or strongmen.⁵⁷ Such categories capture the level of constraint faced by the leader vis-à-vis regime elites and whether senior officials emerged from a party or the military. Since the *Autocratic Regimes* dataset (of Geddes, Wright, and Frantz) underlays these classification judgements, Cambodia would be coded as a machine type rather than a strongman type. This is highly problematic. The recent small war along the Thai-Cambodian border demonstrated just how few constraints senior ruling party officials have on Hun Sen's personal authority and "crazy" behaviour.⁵⁸ The implication here is that the misclassification of such an obvious case is alarming if the goal is to deliver policy-relevant scholarship.

A final research strand concerns the links between authoritarian regimes and repression. A particularly pertinent finding is that party-based regimes are the least repressive and personalist regimes (including hybrid configurations of them) are the most repressive when it comes to civil liberties restrictions and personal integrity violations.⁵⁹ This implies the level of repression in Cambodia should have remained fairly constant in accordance with its conventional classification as a party-based regime. Instead, Hun Sen's personalism has manifested itself in the form of arbitrary arrests, censorship, extrajudicial killings, summary trials as well as bans on assembly and association.⁶⁰ A direct line can be drawn between this behaviour and the increasing personal control exercised by Xi Jinping in China and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey. The implications of this analysis are significant:

Policymakers, academic researchers, and human rights activists need to take notice of the fact that not all autocratic regimes are alike in their repressive practices, and thus they do not all threaten domestic (and/or international) peace to the same degree.⁶¹

A precondition, however, is that the existing stock of datasets accurately classify authoritarian regimes.

This article should not be interpreted as a call for scholars to cease classifying authoritarian regimes. The collective sum of knowledge produced thus far on the institutional and behavioural features of them is both welcoming and essential for future research.

The conventional approach to building datasets, however, has its limits. By relying on the general knowledge of comparativist scholars or graduate students, errors have been produced in the coding of authoritarian regimes. What is missing from these classification schemes is the participation of country experts. This could involve using them to operationalize the relevant concept or direct investigators to the most useful secondary sources. More substantively, country experts could be used to score the prevalence of different institutional arrangements (for example, military, monarchy, party, or personalist subtypes) against predefined indicators. This approach, which involves using experts as paid or unpaid consultants, has been adopted by the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, Democratic Accountability and Linkages, Electoral Integrity, Leadership-Security Ties and Varieties of Democracy projects, amongst many others. A key advantage of this approach is that it relies on individuals – including many nationals – who have a documented knowledge of the political system in question and a specific substantive area. This article therefore recommends greater inclusion of these experts as a way of further improving how we classify and, thus understand, authoritarian regimes.

Notes

1. Wright, “Invest or Insure”; Fjelde, “Generals, Dictators, and Kings”; Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*; Wright and Escribà-Folch, “Authoritarian Institutions”; Way and Weeks, “Making It Personal”; Davenport, “State Repression.”
2. Svobik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 31.
3. Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius, “Authoritarian Regime Types”; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland, “Democracy”; Kailitz and Stockemer, “Regime Legitimation”; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, “Autocratic Breakdown.”
4. The “descriptive method” refers to the process by which social scientists describe classes of events. The six domains of personalization represent a “synthesis.” This means inferences will be drawn from the description of each domain in order to understand how they revolve around the central theme of personalist dictatorship. See Gerring, *Social Science Methodology*, 143–4.
5. Frantz and Kendall-Taylor, “Pathways.”
6. Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles*, 51.
7. Svobik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 5–6.
8. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*.
9. Vyas and Kurmanaev, “Venezuelan President”; Vyas and Munoz, “Venezuela Supreme Court.”
10. Jackson and Rosberg, *Personal Rule*, 143.
11. Gandhi, *Political Institutions*; Boix and Svobik, “Foundations”; Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*.
12. Marquez, *Non-Democratic Politics*.
13. Frantz and Ezrow, *Dictators and Dictatorships*, 224.
14. Decalo, *Psychoses of Power*, 90–5.
15. This definition is adapted from Scott, “Patron-Client Politics.” On iterations of its various subtypes in authoritarian regimes, see Chehabi and Linz, *Sultanistic Regimes*; Bach and Gazibo, *Neopatrimonialism in Africa and Beyond*.
16. Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments*, 62.
17. Erdmann and Engel, “Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered,” 114.
18. Snyder, “Explaining Transitions”; Brownlee, “... And Yet they Persist.”
19. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, “Military Rule”; Escribà-Folch, “Accountable for What?”
20. Brooker, *Non-Democratic Regimes*, 62–7.
21. All biographical details of Hun Sen are from Strangio, *Hun Sen’s Cambodia*, 21–42.
22. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*, Ch. 3.
23. On the dynamics of neopatrimonialism in Cambodia, both historically and contemporarily, see Chandler, *History of Cambodia*; Un, “Patronage Politics”; Un, “Cambodia”; Craig and Pak, “Party Financing”; Morgenbesser, “The Failure of Democratisation.”

24. Thayer, "Cambodia," 88; Pheap and Peter, "As Elections Near," 3.
25. Strangio, *Hun Sen's Cambodia*, 101.
26. Odom and Henderson, "Oknha Ranks Grow," 11–2; Verver and Dahles, "The Institutionalisation of Oknha."
27. Chansy, "Hun Sen Appoints," 23.
28. Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*.
29. Human Rights Watch, *Tell Them That I Want to Kill Them*.
30. Hayes, "All Eyes," 2; Chambers, "Neo-Sultanistic Tendencies."
31. These figures are based on information from Un, "Cambodia"; Chambers, "Neo-Sultanistic Tendencies."
32. Slocomb, *People's Republic of Kampuchea*, 126–7.
33. Royal Government of Cambodia, *Defending the Kingdom*, 6.
34. Vickery, "The Cambodian People's Party"; Um, "Cambodia in 1994."
35. Strangio, *Hun Sen's Cambodia*, 74.
36. On events during this period, including the causes of the 1997 coup, see Brown and Zasloff, *Cambodia Confounders*; Roberts, *Political Transition*; Thayer and Chanda, "Law of the Gun."
37. Peou, "Hun Sen's Pre-Emptive Coup."
38. Grainger, "RCAF's Fractured Past," 1
39. Greitens, *Dictators and their Secret Police*.
40. Thul, Soenthrith, and Samean, "Ke Kim Yan," 1.
41. Short, *Pol Pot*, 386.
42. Cambodia's 1993 constitution makes the king the supreme commander of the RCAF and chairman of the Supreme Council for National Defence, but his authority is ceremonial. Instead, effective power – including over military appointments (article 21) – rests with the vice-chair and prime minister, Hun Sen.
43. Mehta and Mehta, *Strongman*, 252.
44. Heder, "Hun Sen's Consolidation."
45. Reynolds, "Flex of Muscle," 1.
46. Strangio, *Hun Sen's Cambodia*, 102.
47. Ibid.
48. Vickery, "The Cambodian People's Party," 107.
49. Vickery, *Kampuchea*; Dara, "Military, Police Top Brass," 1.
50. Human Rights Watch, "Cambodia."
51. Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles*, 225.
52. Dara, "Hun Sen New CPP President," 1.
53. On electoral patronage in Cambodia, see Craig and Pak, "Party Financing"; Un, "Patronage Politics"; Morgenbesser, *Behind the Façade*.
54. On the legitimization of the CPP and Hun Sen, see Hughes, *The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition*; Noren-Nilsson, "Performance as (Re)incarnation."
55. Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization*; Wright and Escribà-Folch, "Authoritarian Institutions."
56. Peceny, Beer, and Sanchez-Terry, "Dictatorial Peace"; Reiter and Stam, "Identifying the Culprit."
57. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*.
58. Wallace and Vannarin, "Thais Offer Rare Rebuke," 1.
59. Davenport, "State Repression."
60. Human Rights Watch, "30 Years of Hun Sen."
61. Davenport, "State Repression", 500.

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