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To cite this article: Lee Morgenbesser (2017) The failure of democratisation by elections in Cambodia, *Contemporary Politics*, 23:2, 135-155, DOI: [10.1080/13569775.2016.1230317](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1230317)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1230317>



Published online: 27 Sep 2016.



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## The failure of democratisation by elections in Cambodia

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### ABSTRACT

This article questions the explanatory power of the theory of democratisation by elections. This approach to democratisation argues that elections in authoritarian regimes constitute part of a metagame between ruling elites and opponents, which involves a competition for votes inside a larger competition over the nature of political power. The cumulative effect is that even flawed elections raise the costs of repression and lower the costs of toleration in ways that eventually bring about democracy. When applied to the *most likely* case of Cambodia, however, electoral democratisation has resoundingly failed to occur. Instead, this article argues that neopatrimonialism inhibits the transformative power of elections by preventing the emergence of resolute democratic ideals, reform-minded elites and pro-democratic institutions. In this way, the distribution of party-state patronage constitutes a method of co-optation; and flawed elections represent a mechanism to renew and reinforce the historical roots and structural basis of state authority. Using the case of Cambodia, this article develops an account of neopatrimonialism in authoritarian elections and explores implications of the Cambodian experience for the democratisation by elections theory more broadly.

### KEYWORDS

Cambodia; democratisation; elections; authoritarianism; neopatrimonialism

### Introduction

The democratisation by elections theory represents the most salient explanation for why even flawed elections can foster regime change in authoritarian regimes. The most formalised version of this theory (Lindberg, 2009) argues that multi-party and multi-candidate elections – and, specifically, a set of associated mechanisms – increase the costs of repression and decrease the costs of toleration in ways conducive to democracy. The existing scholarship has so far found a robust causal relationship between reiterated competitive elections in authoritarian regimes and democratisation, both globally and regionally (Brownlee, 2009; Donno, 2013b; Edgell, Mechkova, Altman, Bernhard, & Lindberg, 2015; Howard & Roessler, 2006; Lindberg, 2006a). This is especially the case for sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe, but also similarly yet less substantively in Latin America. Despite these findings, the performance of the democratisation by elections theory has not been tested in Southeast Asia. This is problematic given the region's long history with both authoritarian rule and flawed elections. Between 1945 and 2015, 9 authoritarian

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regimes sanctioned 86 competitive elections in Southeast Asia; yet only Indonesia and the Philippines underwent democratisation (Boix, Miller, & Rosato, 2013; Hyde & Marinov, 2012). Given this deviation from theoretical expectations and empirical patterns in other regions, what explains how authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia have withstood the capacity of elections to act as a mode of transition?

This question is addressed using the *failure* of Cambodia as a *most likely* case for democratisation by elections. Despite being the recipient of a historically significant liberal peacebuilding mission, holding five competitive parliamentary elections over two decades, and accumulating a balance of costs favouring regime change, Cambodia continues to stubbornly resist democratisation. Why? This article argues that the democratisation by elections theory has not accounted for the countervailing effects of neopatrimonialism: a political system where the informality of personal relationships is intimately linked with the formality of legal-rational institutions. Since coming to power, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) under Hun Sen has successfully fused the delivery of party-state patronage – which is a method of political co-optation – to support from citizens at the polls. This has prevented the build-up of 'costs' necessary for electoral democratisation, including the existence of resolute democratic ideals, reform-minded elites and pro-democratic institutions. Ultimately, it is evident that, even in the best of circumstances for democratisation, flawed multi-party and multi-candidate elections can serve to renew and reinforce the historical roots and structural bases of state authority.

The case of Cambodia is symptomatic of a broader failure amongst the different theories of democratisation to account for its deviancy. Despite extraordinary growth in wealth, industrialisation, urbanisation and education levels in the last two decades (see World Bank, 2015), for example, the proscriptions of the structural approach remain unfulfilled. This implies that achieving requisite levels of socio-economic development is insufficient for fostering regime change in a country historically beset by authoritarian rule. Similar problems exist for the contingent approach to democratisation, which is premised on the establishment of transitional pacts between influential political actors. In the early 1990s, the United Nations used the Paris Peace Accords to forge a power-sharing agreement between Cambodia's main political parties and warring factions (for a history, see Roberts, 2001). The short-term success of this liberal peacebuilding mission eventually devolved into long-term authoritarian rule. A key difference the democratisation by elections approach has to the structural and contingent approaches is that it assigns primacy to the processes and institutions that are internal to authoritarian regimes. In the process of doing so, however, it downplays how neopatrimonialism – a type of authority that shapes political structures and precipitates political action – inhibits democratisation. The following article makes the case for this argument.

Cambodia's failure to democratise through elections has significant implications for our understanding of democratisation generally. An obvious starting point is the conceptualisation of elections as an institution antithetical to the survival of authoritarian regimes. Despite acknowledging how dictators and ruling parties can prescribe ulterior functions to this institution, this theory nevertheless stipulates that holding more flawed elections pulls authoritarian regimes towards democracy (Schedler, 2002). The failed case of Cambodia instead shows that the fusion of elections and neopatrimonialism offers authoritarian regimes an equilibrium solution to their long-term interests. An accompanying issue is the open-ended time frame for regime change. Since the democratisation by elections

theory does not prescribe a limit to the number of elections, the way neopatrimonialism sustains authoritarianism is subordinated to the presupposition that democracy is inevitable. This article also questions the primacy assigned to elections in the context of democracy promotion. It offers a cautionary tale for the multitude of citizens, civil society groups, opposition parties, international organisations and foreign states who conceive of flawed elections as avenues for democracy. The purported capacity of elections to act as a mode of transition instead needs to be better contextualised. This includes the way certain preconditions, such as neopatrimonialism, can empower or disempower its causal effects.

This article begins with a review and critique of the theory of democratisation by elections. It describes how no less than 16 causal mechanisms purportedly increase the costs of repression and decrease the costs of toleration in ways conducive to democratic change. The second section applies this theoretical framework to Cambodia in order to establish its methodological designation as a most likely case for electoral democratisation.<sup>1</sup> Given its subsequent failure, the third section explains how neopatrimonialism obstructs electoral democratisation in Cambodia: by preventing the growth of resolute democratic ideals, reform-minded elites and pro-democratic institutions. The article concludes by highlighting three lingering problems with the democratisation by elections theory. This includes how authoritarian regimes can use neopatrimonial structures to surmount the strategic dilemma of flawed elections; need for a time frame for electoral democratisation; and the causal weighting assigned to the various costs of repression and toleration.

## The theory of democratisation by elections

During the late twentieth century, approximately 30 countries transitioned from authoritarianism to democracy. This process, known as the ‘third wave’ of democratisation, precipitated a sustained scholarly effort to understand its nature and course (Huntington, 1991; Linz & Stepan, 1996; O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). A few dominant models of democratisation emerged. The structural approach emphasised socio-economic requisites commonly associated with liberal democracy: such as how higher levels of wealth, industrialisation, urbanisation and education spur regime change. Such preconditions were sometimes linked to longer term processes of historical change, especially how certain structures of power – economic, social and political – provide political actors with constraints and opportunities. The contingent approach, by contrast, emphasised not only the choices of key officials and elites, but the bargains and negotiations between them. This means democratisation is contingent on why, when and how agents act, especially those who control state institutions. Both of these models have played an important role in explaining the nature and scope of democratisation within and across countries. Despite such progress, what is less established is how the institutional differences between authoritarian regimes may encourage or discourage democratisation (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). While a vast scholarship now exists on how to classify these political regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006), the impact of such institutions on democratisation has traditionally been less understood.

This dearth of knowledge gave rise to notion that elections ‘matter’ for democratisation. A key assumption early on was that the institutionalisation of electoral competition constituted evidence itself of democratic consolidation. This was symptomatic of a failure

to engage with the first-order question of what democratisation actually meant. Upon recognising this ‘fallacy of electoralism’ (Carothers, 1997; Karl, 1995), a more nuanced account of how elections foster democratic change began to emerge. The most prominent and formalised approach is advanced by Lindberg (2009), who conceptualises authoritarian elections as a metagame over both the outcome of the polls and the overarching rules of the political system. This protracted contest imbues flawed elections with strategic ambiguity: authoritarian regimes aim to maintain control and receive legitimacy, while opposition parties aim to secure concessions without bestowing credibility (Schedler, 2002). Over time, however, the repeated sanctioning of competitively flawed elections has the intrinsic capacity to pull authoritarian regimes towards democracy. This is premised on the idea that ‘The more the cost of suppression exceeds the costs of toleration, the greater the chance for a competitive regime’ (Dahl, 1971, p. 15). The immediate task is to provide an account of the balance of the costs.

The democratisation by elections theory argues that flawed elections change the balance of costs associated with repression and toleration in a way that encourages democratic transition. Since the primary goal of authoritarian regimes is survival, the exercise of repression must be carefully weighed against the need to reduce casualties, minimise economic losses, uphold legitimacy, maintain foreign support and preserve elite unity. The display of toleration in the form of increased participation and contestation must also be carefully calibrated in order to avoid the build-up of expectations amongst citizens, opposition parties and political elites about the prospects of regime change. Given these constraints, the democratisation by elections identifies 16 mutually reinforcing mechanisms that eventually make flawed multi-party and multi-candidate elections a mode of democratisation (Lindberg, 2009, p. 329). The full spectrum of costs includes:

- *Spread of democratic ideals and expectations*: Builds a self-fulfilling prophecy about democratisation.
- *Citizen mobilisation and protest*: Produces political conjunctures and encourages defections from incumbent regimes.
- *Clumsy manipulation of elections*: Provokes more mobilisation and protest due to the obvious loss of popular sovereignty.
- *Sophistication of regime challengers*: Increases coordination and likelihood of electoral success for opposition coalitions.
- *Diffusion of election methods*: Emulates the most successful tactics used to topple incumbent regimes elsewhere.
- *Increased media freedom and possibility*: Creates an opportunity for newfound criticism of incumbent regimes.
- *Pro-democratic organisations and institutions*: Offers an arena for civil society groups to push for change and state institutions to resist the application of repression.
- *Defections from incumbent regime*: Aids the formation of a transitional pact between regime reformers and opponent moderates.
- *International attention and pressures*: Delivers support to opponents and restricts the choices available to incumbent regimes.

- *Increased institutional complexity and contestation*: Offers alternative legal avenues for challenging election results.
- *Moderation of opposition*: Lowers the risks of holding elections for incumbent regimes.
- *Co-optation of opposition*: Lowers the likelihood of losing elections for incumbent regimes.
- *Skilful manipulation of elections*: Provokes less mobilisation and protest due to no obvious loss of popular sovereignty.
- *Transformation from autocrats to democrats*: Allows incumbent regimes to oversee transition to democracy through increasingly free and fair elections.
- *Incentives to promote democratic institutions*: Encourages elite actors to fulfil their formally defined roles and, by extension, aid democratisation.
- *Gradual transition*: Offers a means for the transfer of power via formal term limits.

In addition to how these mechanisms operate in concert, many have been found to have independent causal relevance themselves. This includes how the creation of opposition party coalitions (Wahman, 2013; van de Walle, 2006), diffusion of an election model (Bunce & Wolchik, 2009, 2010, 2011), existence of international attention and pressure (Donno, 2013a; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012), adherence to term limits (Maltz, 2007) and onset of mass protests (Beaulieu, 2014) aid democratisation. Such a rich body of scholarship is evidence of how the democratisation by elections theory represents the most salient explanation for why even flawed elections can foster regime change in authoritarian regimes. Having outlined it, this article will now explain its failure in the most likely case of Cambodia.

## Democratisation by elections in Cambodia?

In 1992, the United Nations intervened in Cambodia to implement the Paris Peace Accords. Among its objectives, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was tasked with organising and supervising the 1993 election. The result was a surprise win for the National United Front for an Independent, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) under Prince Norodom Ranariddh over the incumbent CPP under Hun Sen. In an atmosphere of growing instability, which included threats of succession, a co-equal coalition government was eventually formed to settle the stand-off. In July 1997, however, the CPP ousted FUNCINPEC on the grounds they were colluding with remnants of the Khmer Rouge and illegally importing weapons into the country (Royal Government of Cambodia, 1997). This marked the onset of unfettered authoritarian rule.

After taking outright power, an election was scheduled for July 1998. When the CPP failed to win the two-thirds majority required to elect a prime minister, it was once again forced to unite with FUNCINPEC. This time, however, Hun Sen would be the sole prime minister and Ranariddh the chairman of the National Assembly. A similar pattern of events occurred following the 2003 election, with the difference being the need to accommodate the opposition Sam Rainsy Party. In the 2008 election, the CPP finally won the necessary number of seats to govern outright. This afforded it the luxury to form a coalition government with FUNCINPEC, but only to improve its parliamentary

**Table 1.** Mechanisms of electoral impact on the metagame of regime transition.

Mechanism	Applied to Cambodia
<b>Costs of repression</b>	
Spread of democratic ideals and expectations	✓ Understanding and desire that has matured over time
Citizen mobilisation and protest	✓ Routine event following elections
Clumsy manipulation of elections	✓ Exists in conjunction with skilful manipulation
Sophistication of regime challengers	✓ Two main opposition parties formed a coalition for the 2013 election
Diffusion of election methods	✓ Almost all strategies used by the Cambodian National Rescue Party
Increased media freedom and possibility	✓ Evident in four out of five elections
Pro-democratic organisations and institutions	× Police and military remain loyal to ruling party
Defections from incumbent regime	× No notable defections
International attention and pressures	× Very superficial
Institutional complexity and contestation	× Not possible outside of established channels
<b>Costs of toleration</b>	
Moderation of opposition	✓ No threats to investigate or prosecute regime officials for prior crimes
Co-optation of opposition	✓ Opposition members routinely defect during election campaigns
Skilful manipulation of elections	✓ Exists in conjunction with clumsy manipulation
Transformation from autocrats to democrats	× Has not occurred for Hun Sen or any prominent political elites
Incentives to promote democratic institutions	× No pacts between regime reformers and opposition moderates
Gradual transition	× Term limits not enshrined in constitution

majority. At the 2013 election, however, a more unified opposition effort in the form of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) helped produce a significant swing against the CPP. Despite two decades of competitive elections, Hun Sen's ruling party proved adept at solidifying its power at the expense of democracy.

The task here is to establish Cambodia's status as a most likely case for electoral democratisation. This means demonstrating how the costs of repression and toleration accumulated in favour of democratisation over five elections. By the 2013 election, in fact, Cambodia possessed nine of the 16 relevant causal mechanisms for regime change (see Table 1). The fact authoritarian rule continues implies that another causal mechanism, identified here as neopatrimonialism, has a disproportionate influence on Cambodia's regime trajectory.

### **Costs of repression**

The sanctioning of 'competitive' elections by authoritarian regimes requires them to permit a degree of popular sovereignty. Once this principle is exercised, however, any democratic ideals and expectations held by citizens and opposition parties can mature into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Lindberg, 2006b, pp. 111–113). Despite a long history of authoritarian rule, democratic ideals and expectations do exist in Cambodia. This is due in large part to UNTAC's administration of the 1993 election, which included a nationwide civic education programme explaining the relationship between elections, democracy and human rights (Frieson, 1996). Since the early 1990s, a broad cross-section of people have come to understand the importance of democratic institutions and procedures, including the need for checks and balances, equal sovereignty, pluralism, term limits, transparency and an independent media. According to the latest East Asia Barometer (2008) survey, a majority of respondents immediately define democracy using words such as 'power of the people', 'freedom of speech, press, expression' and 'freedom and civil liberties'. Similarly, 82.5% of respondents want Cambodia to be a full democracy and 80.6% either

disapprove or strongly disapprove of the statement that ‘we should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things’. The National Democratic Institute (1996, p. 4), Asia Foundation (2003, pp. 39–53) and International Republican Institute (2008, pp. 25–29, 2013, p. 7) have all recorded similar results over the last two decades. At the 2013 election, for example, when voters were given a choice between the CPP and the CNRP, an increasing number of people were attracted to the opposition’s alternative vision. While this shift is hardly surprising in the context of the endemic corruption, demographic redistribution and perception changes, it is clear that the passage of time is eroding the CPP’s electoral appeal. This has been accompanied by intensifying demands for democracy.

The most obvious manifestation of such demands is when elections become an arena for mobilisation and protest. Besides the prominent example of the People Power Revolution in the Philippines, authoritarian regimes have been deposed following post-election protests in Serbia, Madagascar, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan to cite a few examples (see Beau-lieu, 2014; Brancati, 2014). In Cambodia, mass protests have immediately followed the announcement of results in the last four national elections. A consistent catalyst has been the CPP’s clumsy manipulation of the electoral process, which is characterised by gross violations and inflexible postures (see Case, 2006). This has included problems regarding voter registration, campaign financing and media coverage (Hyde & Marinov, 2012). In 1998, for example, mass protests took place over a threeweek period after the National Election Commission (NEC) dismissed opposition complaints about the election result. This was especially the case in Phnom Penh, where street clashes occurred between FUNCINPEC supporters and CPP loyalists. In the midst of the crisis, Hun Sen declared that ‘If the opposition thinks I’m going to step down they’re dreaming ... and if they try to dissolve the present government by other means they will face military action’ (Grainger & Chameau, 1998, p. 1). Given the meagre concessions extracted by Ranariddh to eventually end the crisis, Hun Sen’s confidence was well founded.

A similar pattern of events occurred following the 2013 election, which was judged to be the fifth worst of the 73 parliamentary and presidential elections held worldwide that year (see Norris, Frank, & Martinez i Coma, 2014). When the NEC dismissed opposition complaints, the CNRP boycotted the National Assembly and demanded an investigation into electoral irregularities by an independent commission with international support. Over the next few months, they coordinated scores of multi-day protests involving upwards of 40,000 supporters in Phnom Penh (Quinlan, Ponniah, & Boyle, 2013). In the end, the CNRP was able to secure a licence for its own television channel, four of the nine seats on the NEC and a deputy house speaker position. This showed that the costs of repression were higher for the CPP than in any previous election.

Such an outcome was also made possible by the presence of sophisticated regime challengers using a refined election method. The CPP had historically been able to successfully divide the opposition with the lure of political appointments. Following both the 1998 and 2003 elections, for example, FUNCINPEC became a junior partner in the government. This was despite the coalition it had formed with Sam Rainsy Party; a union predicated on the idea that neither party would cooperate with the CPP (Beresford, 2005; Peou, 1999). The general benefits of opposition coalitions is that they draw votes away from the regime; limit opportunities for co-optation; discourage the use of illegal practices by loyalists and help mobilise citizens to invest support in a credible alternative. In Cambodia, the

traditional disunity of the major opposition parties has been further compounded by an inability or unwillingness to employ tactics that have helped topple authoritarian regimes elsewhere. This all changed during the 2013 election. Not only did the two leading opposition parties coalesce into a crucial new party, but they employed almost eight of the nine tactics associated with the electoral model (see [Table 2](#)).

The application of this electoral model in Cambodia followed its successful deployment in Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine between 1996 and 2005. In addition to the above initiatives, the CNRP held marches, led citizen meetings, conducted door-to-door canvassing and organised concerts. Such exemplary activities, along with the widespread use of paraphernalia, projected a positive image aimed at persuading citizens to take a chance on them. This no doubt contributed to the swing against the CPP which, in a sign of how the election had increased the costs of repression, lost an unprecedented 22 seats in parliament.

The final mechanism increasing the costs of repression has been increased media freedom during elections. In the context of electoral democratisation, such newfound space provides a means to express popular pressures for democracy, publicise clues about elite disunity, provide information on the international costs of authoritarianism and contribute to the collective belief that the dictator is vulnerable (Lindberg, 2009, pp. 337–338). Despite traditionally tight control, data from the *Freedom of the Press* (Freedom House, 2015) and *World Press Freedom* (Reporters Without Borders, 2015) indexes reveals there have been marginal election year improvements in the overall legislative framework, censorship and self-censorship, pluralism and independence. In fact, there has been increased media freedom during four of the past five elections (see years marked with asterisks in [Table 3](#)). In 2013, for example, the rise of social media helped dilute the CPP's long-standing domination of the print, radio and television mediums; mainly because one third of all registered voters used social media to gather and disseminate information (Freedom House, 2013). This was especially the case for younger people with mobile devices. Through Facebook and Twitter, CNRP activists were able to conduct grassroots campaigns, connect with out-of-reach voters, organise protests and discuss politics in an unfiltered way (Williemyns, 2013). While the use of social media during elections is still in its infancy, it is clear the

**Table 2.** Employment of electoral model in Cambodia.

Opposition strategy	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013
Unity of opposition	–	–	–	–	+
Ambitious campaigns	+	+	+	+	+
Voter registration drives	+	+	+	–	+
Voter turnout drives	+	–	+	–	+
Pressures on election commissions	+	+	+	+	+
Civil society and youth movement collaboration	–	–	–	+	+
Public opinion polls	–	–	–	–	–
Exit polls	–	–	–	–	+
Parallel voter tabulation	–	+	+	+	+

Source: Adapted from Bunce and Sharon (2011, p. 242).

Notes: Information for the 1993 election was gained from Austin (1995) and Frieson (1996). The remainder was gained from the Asian Network for Free Elections (1999, pp. 17–40, 2003, pp. 24–66, 2008, pp. 24–43), Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (2003, pp. 13–100, 2008, pp. 21–33, 2013, pp. 29–83), European Union (2003, pp. 11–40, 2008, pp. 19–45), International Republican Institute (1999, pp. 5–24, 2004, pp. 5–17), and National Democratic Institute (1999, pp. 26–37, 2004, pp. 3–18).

CPP had inadvertently accelerated its growth by using the mass media as a propaganda tool. Once again, holding an election had increased the costs of its repression.

### **Costs of toleration**

A key challenge for authoritarian regimes is to calibrate electoral manipulation at a level that both guarantees control and fosters credibility. The less durable regimes tend to favour the former goal. By making victory a singular manifestation of a few flaunted gains, they actually increase costs of repression. The more durable regimes achieve a better balance between these goals. Since victory is the collective manifestation of many hidden gains, the costs of toleration decrease. No matter the approach, however, democratisation is said to be the inevitable beneficiary (Schedler, 2009). A case in point is Singapore. Despite traditionally employing measured and appropriately ordered manipulation, repeated elections have purportedly begun to shift the regime away from authoritarianism (Ortmann, 2011). This is illustrative of the inevitable costs of flawed elections.

In Cambodia, clumsy manipulation involving issues of voter registration, campaign financing and media coverage has been combined with skilful manipulation involving of vote buying, vote counting and the appeals process (Hyde & Marinov, 2012). The most important change occurred after the CPP lost the 1993 election, whereby its repression-orientated gambit failed to force enough citizens to vote for it. This led it to more actively invest in informal vote buying, especially throughout its rural strongholds (see Hughes, 2003; Morgenbesser, 2016). During elections, the CPP actively ties its self-

**Table 3.** Media freedom in Cambodia.

Year	Freedom House	World Press Freedom	Combined score
1993*	50	–	50
1994	60	–	60
1995	65	–	65
1996	65	–	65
1997	65	–	65
1998*	62	–	62
1999	61	–	61
2000	61	–	61
2001	68	–	68
2002	64	24	88
2003*	63	20	83
2004	62	37	99
2005	61	23	84
2006	58	27	85
2007	60	25	85
2008*	61	35	96
2009	61	35	96
2010	63	44	97
2011	63	55	118
2012	66	55	121
2013*	66	42	108
2014	69	41	110
2015	69	41	110

Note: Countries are given a score of between 0 (best) and 100 (worst). Overall, increased media freedom was present when the combined score (out of 200) decreases for an election year.

designation as a ‘meritorious benefactor’ (*saboraschon*) capable of delivering stability and prosperity to the custom of mutual reciprocity, which is embedded in traditional patron-client relationships. Rather than coerce support and manipulate the vote count, it buys support – sometimes obviously and sometimes subtly – through the distribution of patronage to citizens living in the approximately 14,000 rural villages spread through the country. This has the effect of decreasing the costs of toleration in the sense that the ruling party can allow both opposition parties and competitive elections.

The remaining mechanisms lowering the costs of toleration for the CPP and working in favour of democratisation in Cambodia are the moderation of opponents and their openness to co-optation. The general signs of opposition weakness in authoritarian regimes are their small size, limited durability, poor access to resources, low legitimacy, lack of coordination and subordination to a ruling party or dictator (Rakner & Van De Walle, 2009). Such problems make it far easier for authoritarian regimes to tolerate opposition parties and candidates, because they do not pose a significant challenge during elections.

This is a fitting description of elections in Cambodia. The earliest evidence is FUNCINPEC’s repeated willingness to enter into a coalition government, especially after it won the 1993 election and was ousted in the 1997 coup. According to the available information, Ranariddh never made any strong demands for democracy in return for his support (Brown & Zasloff, 1998; Roberts, 2001). This moderation evidently continued. Following the 2003 election, for example, the CPP attempted to broker yet another coalition government with FUNCINPEC. 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 (Heder, 2005). Instead of demanding more political rights and civil liberties, then, the leading opposition candidate demanded greater patronage from Hun Sen. In the past, scores of low-ranking opposition members have also defected to the CPP in order to take up undersecretary-of-state postings and government adviser jobs (Pheap & Peter, 2013). While senior CNRP officials have so far resisted such overtures, they still maintain moderate positions on a range of controversial issues. During the 2013 election, for instance, no promise was made to investigate systemic corruption and human rights violations should they win power. The timidity of the CNRP was further evidenced by the fact it later entered into a ‘culture of dialogue’ with the CPP that unsurprisingly allowed Hun Sen to restrict what the opposition could say and do (see Williemyms, 2015, 2016). This was just the latest sign of how the ruling party finds favourable conditions to tolerate the opposition during elections, which lowers the risk of holding them periodically.

### ***Balance of costs***

On the conditions that encourage or discourage electoral democratisation, the balance of costs determines the direction of change. As Dahl (1971, pp. 15–16) has argued, the lower the costs of toleration, the greater the security of the incumbent regime; the higher the costs of repression, the greater the security of its opponents. After the largest ever liberal peacebuilding mission – up until that point – and five national elections, Cambodia possessed 9 of the 16 mechanisms assigned causal relevance by the democratisation by

elections theory. This even included what is claimed to be the most causally important mechanism: an opposition coalition. Despite this favourable balance of costs, authoritarian rule has only intensified in Cambodia. The remainder of this article offers an answer to why this has occurred.

## Neopatrimonialism in Cambodia

Why has electoral democratisation failed in Cambodia? The argument here is that the distribution of party-state patronage inhibits the build-up of costs in the form of citizens, elites and institutions demanding of democracy. In this sense, patronage represents a form of embedded co-optation (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014), which entails encapsulating sectors of the populace into the state apparatus by inducing them to behave in ways that they otherwise might not. This is made possible by the fact political authority in Cambodia has long been based on neopatrimonialism (Chandler, 2008; Strangio, 2014). To make this argument, the following section first describes how authoritarian regimes use elections to buttress neopatrimonialism, before demonstrating how party-state patronage provides an incentive to support authoritarian rule in Cambodia.

### *Neopatrimonialism and authoritarian elections*

Patrimonialism is a traditional type of authority found in developing countries. Under such an arrangement, 'obedience is owed not to enacted rules but to the person who occupies a position of authority by tradition or who has been chosen for it by the traditional master' (Weber, 1978, p. 227). This means political activity is less about class ties or primordial sentiments and more about bonds based personal loyalty. In his seminal account of patron-clientelism, which is an imbedded form of social organisation operating as part of patrimonial authority, Scott (1972, p. 92) defined the basic relationship as

A special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including services, to the patron.

A few implied features of this definition merit elaboration. The fact the patron holds more a priori power, status and wealth makes their relationship to the client inherently unequal. Mutual reciprocity is essential, however, because it ensures the flow of mutual benefits. This clear-cut contingency is what makes patrimonial exchange different from other forms of particularism (Hicken, 2011). This exchange process is also very multifaceted (Mayer, 1966). On the patron side, the support given can include blessing a wedding, clearing bureaucratic hurdles, introducing business contacts, offering legal protection and so on. On the client side, the services rendered can include administering repression, mobilising supporters, organising workers and providing labour, amongst many other needs. A very similar logic of exchange holds for more overt political activities.

The traditional features of patrimonial authority are now retained by the modern state.<sup>2</sup> This adaptation began in post-colonial societies, which managed to develop institutions and processes that differed from the Weberian model of the nation-state (Eisenstadt,

1973; Medard, 1982). In relation to sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, Bratton and van de Walle (1997, p. 62) observed an entrenched group of 'hybrid political systems in which the customs and patterns of patrimonialism co-exist with, and suffuse, rational legal institutions'. This mix of two different types of political authority is best understood as neopatrimonialism. Under such an arrangement, the 'exercise of power is erratic and unpredictable (as opposed to the calculable exercise of power embedded in universal values), while public norms are formal and rational, but their social practice is personal and informal' (Erdmann & Engel, 2007, p. 114). This dualism at the structural level leads to a wide range of outcomes in developing countries (Bach & Gazibo, 2012; Medard, 2000). At one end of the spectrum are regulated neopatrimonial states characterised by an inclusive patrimonialism revolving around redistribution. This best describes the Central African Republic under Jean-Bédél Bokassa (Titley, 1997) and Uzbekistan under Islam Karimov (Ikhamov, 2012). At the other end are purely predatory neopatrimonial states that correspond to an exclusionary sultanic type of patrimonialism. This was evident in the Dominican Republic under Rafael Trujillo (Hartlyn, 1998) and Haiti under François Duvalier (Nicholls, 1998). Between these two extremes is a range of intermediate situations capable of accommodating elections, including in Cambodia.

Authoritarian regimes can use flawed elections in ways antithetical to democratisation. For those based upon neopatrimonialism, elections provide the capacity to renew and reinforce the historical roots and contemporary bases of state authority (see Morgenbesser, 2016). The goal is to institutionalise repetitive elections as a modern reconstitution of a distributive mechanism of traditional societies; namely by combining informality of personal relationships with the formality of state institutions. In an attempt to make the party-state indispensable to political and social life, dictators and ruling parties distribute development projects, material goods and specialised services to citizens in exchange for their support (see Koehler, 2008; Lust-Okar, 2006; Rouquie, 1978). All else being equal, even flawed elections allow dictators and ruling parties to determine whether they are getting a return on their investment, while also allowing citizens to improve their subsistence. The latter outcome, of course, can easily come at the expense of broad demands for democracy, especially in rural areas. Ultimately, the value of elections is that they reduce the disparity in bargaining power between authoritarian regimes and citizens by fostering credibility, predictability and reliability. The politicisation of this exchange process means that the fate of authoritarian regimes and the likelihood of democratisation becomes tied to how effectively elections sustain neopatrimonialism. Since the early 1990s, Cambodia's ruling party (under Hun Sen) has proved to be remarkably successful.

### ***Neopatrimonialism and Cambodian elections***

The CPP is able to negate any structural opportunity for electoral democratisation by using Cambodia's imbedded patron-client system. Since the establishment of modern state institutions, which occurred under French occupation (1863–1953), the patrimonial sphere has constantly penetrated the rational-legal sphere, twisting its logic, functions and effects. In the 1990s, UNTAC attempted to separate the state from society so that rational-legal institutions could develop, thus changing the way citizens understood authority and power (Frieson, 1996). This represented an affront to the CPP. From that point on,

it set out to undo UNTAC's reform programme by saving the historical roots and contemporary bases of state authority.

The CPP's motivation for doing so was that democratisation threatened to eradicate the very political system its authority rested on: neopatrimonialism. At the same time, however, elections could not be abandoned because of their capacity to ratify the patron-client exchange process. The aim of satisfying these competing needs led the CPP to embrace elections as a way of validating the indispensability of the party-state as a redistributive agent. This strategy has subsequently prevented the emergence of citizens, elites and institutions who can *effectively* contribute to electoral democratisation. Put another way, the absence of three mechanisms trumps the presence of nine other mechanisms assigned causal significance by the democratisation by elections theory (see [Table 1](#)). The relevant mechanisms are 'self-fulfilling prophecies: spread of democratic ideals and expectations', 'organisations and institutions vested in pro-democratic action' and 'incentives for elite actors and state institutions to promote democratic institutions and get locked-in' (Lindberg, 2009, p. 329). So long as neopatrimonialism prevents emergence of these mechanisms, electoral democratisation in Cambodia will remain elusive.

The distribution of patronage represents a powerful disincentive for many ordinary Cambodians to use elections as an arena to advance democracy. Despite survey results showing an underlying desire for regime change, the actual fulfilment of democratic ideals and expectations is juxtaposed to the fact that receiving patronage requires a demonstration of loyalty to the party-state. This is particularly the case for the majority of the population living in the countryside, where elections represent a local competition for patronage. During the 2003 election, for example, Hun Sen promised one rural district US\$39,900 for new pagodas and mosques, US\$5400 for a school excursion, US\$4200 for flood protection, US\$3000 for a new religious hanger, US\$1500 for a primary school, 170 tonnes of rice, 24 school buildings containing 181 classrooms, 15 tonnes of cement, 12 sets of computers, 11 generators, 8 printers and photocopiers, 3 sewing class buildings with 100 machines, 2 televisions, 2 video cassette recorders and 1 bridge (Hun Sen, 2003). Indeed, those protests that do occur in the countryside during election years tend to be over the quality and quantity of patronage received, rather than the need for democracy (Hughes, 2006).

On a national scale, the distribution of patronage has the effect of co-opting citizens from protesting election outcomes. While there are many citizens opposed to the status quo, particular in the urban centres, they have failed to represent critical mass at a crucial juncture. Since patrimonialism is based on certain habits and routines, such as fulfilling exchange obligations and recognising status, it is clear that a majority of people accept the customs prescribed by the patron-client relationship (Ovesen, Trankell, & Ojendal, 1996). This is indicative of how many rural citizens recognise their position within Cambodia's neopatrimonial system and the attached obligation to support the CPP at the polls. 'The rectitude of these intransitive, graded relationships has been drummed into everyone from birth', Chandler (1973, p. 39) writes, 'Cambodian proverbs and didactic literature are filled with references to the helplessness of the individual and to the importance of accepting power relationships.' Ultimately, absent a shortfall of patronage distribution and resolute support for democracy from citizens, electoral democratisation becomes unlikely.

Another contributing cost missing in Cambodia is a group of influential elites who use elections to advance democratisation. This is due to the way co-optation offers individuals, especially those who do particularly well under the party-state, a powerful motive to support it. Who are these elites? The highly personalised and opaque nature of Cambodia's political system makes it difficult to identify them. This is captured by Strangio (2013):

When political arrangements are determined by personal understandings and backroom deals ... it is very hard to come to grips with exactly how power moves through the system. We can say with some confidence that Hun Sen sits atop this pyramid and is among its main beneficiaries, but anything beyond that – exactly how the superstructure of patronage interacts with him and his close associates, exactly how the most powerful interests in the system are balanced – is very hard to say with confidence. A full comprehension of the Cambodian political tapestry would require an understanding of how every thread interacts with every other.

Notwithstanding such difficulties, a few general claims can be made about the relationship between elections, neopatrimonialism and elite behaviour. The first relevant group of elites is comprised of corporate and industrial tycoons. In return for helping the CPP win elections, they are awarded the lion's share of business concessions, contracts and licences. A recent investigation put the size of this group at around 700 people (called *oknhas*) (Odom & Henderson, 2014). This is the official title for an individual who donates at least US\$100,000 annually to the state (i.e. CPP) for the purpose of 'national development'. Depending on the size of their financial contributions, some *oknhas* are also employed by Hun Sen. Following the 2013 election, for example, 55 tycoons were appointed as his 'personal advisers' or 'personal assistants' (Chansy, 2013). The second relevant group of elites includes leading central government and administrative figures, provincial and district governors, high-ranking military and police officials, senior party representatives and family members. During elections, these elites distributed patronage by working in teams to identify, fund and implement 'development' projects in their constituencies (Pak, 2011; Un, 2005, 2006). In fact, most actually sit atop their own patronage clusters, all of which exist inside the overarching patron-client pyramid. This means the system is both partially interlocking, in that separate clusters can act in a unified way, and partially competitive, in that different factions jostle for wealth. In any case, it is clear that the use of patronage has solidified a winning coalition of political elites predisposed to preserving both neopatrimonialism and authoritarianism.

The final obstruction to electoral democratisation is the co-optation of the military and police. This is highly problematic given the decisive role these institutions play in the breakdown of authoritarian regimes; usually in conjunction with a dissenting alliance of soft liners (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). The key reason for their opposition in this case is that the elites heading these institutions are long-standing clients of Hun Sen. Such personal relationships are often referred to as 'strings' (*khsae*) of individuals connected by dependency and exchange (Hinton, 2005; Strangio, 2014). In accordance with the logic of patron-clientelism, Hun Sen provides such officials with the political access and legal impunity required to undertake profiteering and rent-seeking opportunities (Global Witness, 2009). In exchange for this umbrella of protection, the military and police provide two forms of support come election time. Beforehand, they carry out intimidation against opposition supporters and gather additional funding for the distribution of perks to voters (Pak, 2011). This is indicative of how senior officials within these institutions use

their positions as public employees to fulfil their concurrent obligations as private patrons. Afterwards, they threaten or use force against any individuals and/or groups who actively dispute the CPP's 'victory' at the polls. This is typically done under the guise of not only maintaining 'social order' and 'national security', but defending the 'legal government' in the event of mass demonstrations (*The Cambodia Herald*, 2014).

Given the rewards accrued via party-state patronage, neither the military nor police have any overwhelming incentive to aid electoral democratisation. Until neopatrimonial structures are weakened, as occurred in the Philippines under Marcos and Indonesia under Suharto, this situation is unlikely to change without an internal conflict within these institutions, mass demonstrations and a pact with the opposition.

## Conclusion

This article tested the democratisation by elections theory and its key proposition that repeated elections in authoritarian regimes further democracy. Using the most likely case of Cambodia, it was shown how the costs of repression and toleration had indeed built up in favour of regime change by the time of the 2013 election, but democratisation did not occur. This was due to the intervening presence of neopatrimonialism. In theoretical terms, it inhibited the emergence of not only resolute democratic ideals amongst a critical mass of the population, but a democratic alliance between reform-minded elites and factional elements within coercive institutions. Given this finding, three theoretical implications are pertinent for the scholarship on democratisation.

The first issue concerns the key claim repeated elections offer authoritarian regimes an unsustainable set of strategic choices within the metagame of regime change. This is premised on the notion that multi-party and multi-candidate elections open up a window of uncertainty by creating simultaneous pressure towards full authoritarian control and full democratic uncertainty. Since dictators and ruling parties cannot dictate the terms of both competition and legitimation, each of which are conflicting imperatives, they will not accept flawed elections as an equilibrium solution to their long-term interests. The problem shown by the case of Cambodia, however, is that the distribution of patronage antecedes questions of legitimacy. 'According to the kind of legitimacy which is claimed,' Weber argued, 'the type of obedience, the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, and the mode of exercising authority, will all differ fundamentally' (1978, p. 213). To the extent the regime seeks legitimation, then, it does so by fulfilling its obligations as the chief patron of Cambodian society, rather than appealing to any underlying beliefs in popular sovereignty. This fundamentally changes the strategic calculus. In addition to removing the denial of legitimacy as a bargaining chip for the opposition, it demonstrates the capacity of flawed elections to achieve distant goals. By implication, stable neopatrimonial structures can actually prevent periodic elections from intrinsically pulling regimes away from authoritarianism and towards democracy. This finding ought to be further tested in Malaysia and Thailand, where such a confluence of cultural-historical forces and political institutions exists.

Another issue is the lack of precision on how many flawed elections are required for democratisation to begin. This is a consequence of the theory of democratisation by elections needing to give ample time for the costs of repression to exceed the costs of toleration. The inherent problem of such an open-ended time frame is that the very causal

mechanisms capable of sustaining authoritarian rule over a prolonged period are made subordinate to the presupposition that regime change is inevitable. This was the case for neopatrimonialism in Cambodia, which showed how a favourable balance of costs for democratisation becomes subordinate to an opposing and evidently more influential causal mechanism. Indeed, the outcome in Cambodia offers a cautionary tale about how elections are not institutionally predisposed. While contemporary liberal democracies have come closer to realising the power of elections for democratic purposes, authoritarian regimes use them to pursue other less normatively appealing goals. By establishing a time frame on electoral democratisation, it becomes possible to avoid making the same teleological assumptions that once plagued the transition paradigm, which assumed that elections make a democracy. Otherwise there is a risk that the very strategies authoritarian regimes employ to survive will be misinterpreted as markers of regime change.

The final issue is the lack of mechanical differentiation between the individual costs of repression and toleration. This is based on the observation that the strategic choices authoritarian regimes make in response to the balance of costs varies according to context. The key problem, however, is that the actual effects of repression and toleration have so far been treated as causally equal. In Cambodia, for example, the absence of term limits enshrined in the constitution was presumed to be as consequential as the foundation of an opposition coalition. Such a conclusion belies what has been learnt about democratic transitions over the past few decades, particular by the structural and contingent approaches. An alternative method would be to arrange the costs of flawed elections hierarchically, thereby allowing a more positive assertion to be made about the relationship of a cost to conjunctions of other costs. This would be particularly helpful for explaining cases like Cambodia, which has diverged from an expected outcome due to the predominant role of neopatrimonialism. Given the complex reality of democratisation episodes, it is essential to have an approach capable of accounting for the interaction between political institutions and historical processes across different regimes.

## Notes

1. This article analyses the function of elections from the perspective of 'authoritarian regimes' (Hermet, Rose, & Rouquie, 1978), rather than 'hybrid regimes' (Diamond, 2002; Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007). The problem with the latter approach is that it assumes authoritarian elections are merely a substandard representation of an institution best practised by liberal democracies. Indeed, it stretches the meaning of democratic elections to hybrid regimes and, thus, fails to account for the functions prescribed to elections by dictators and ruling parties (see Morgenbesser, 2014).
2. Hence the 'neo' prefix.

## Acknowledgements

In addition to the editorial team and reviewers, the author thanks Ian Hall and Jason Sharman for their helpful feedback on this article.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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