Korob, Kaud, Klach:[1] In Search of Agency in Rural Cambodia

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This article takes the dominant view of a top-down Khmer political culture as its point of departure and explores the extent to which the last decade's political changes have altered the socio-political landscape and triggered the growth of agency in rural areas. In particular, the reform of democratic decentralisation and its integrated 'soft' values are scrutinised in fields such as views on local governance, popular discourse on decentralisation, rural NGO activity and the gendering of politics.

The dominant assessment of Cambodian political culture in the current academic literature is that it is quite 'monotheistic' in that it only acknowledges a single 'doctrine' regarding that culture. A rather distinct 'portrait' emerges: a political culture within a Brahman-Vedic tradition, stemming from the origin of Khmerness itself, embodied in the Angkorean era and embedded in society for centuries. Whether we look at historians emphasising the roots and longevity of this culture, sociologists arguing its embeddedness, or anthropologists ethnographically observing its micro-processes, among the recurring features are: exercise of power, social hierarchies, relational rigidity, patriarchal dominance, peasant docility, distance between the state and the people, a lack of general trust and social fragmentation.[2] Cambodia's modern disasters could thus be

1 'Respect, admiration, fear' – a greeting every Cambodian recognises and uses, typically in addressing state authorities; see below for a discussion.

2 David Chandler, *A history of Cambodia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983); Michael Vickery, *Kampuchea: Economics, politics and society* (London: Pinter/Rienner, 1986); Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia: A shattered society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Serge Thion, *Watching

understood as a 'natural' consequence of this culturally defined history.[3] Development practitioners follow suit and design projects in line with, or in response to, this assumed culture.[4]

Moreover, the prevalence of crude authoritarianism and large-scale violence associated with well over three decades of revolution, Khmer Rouge rule and civil war serves to reinforce perceptions of a society ruled by sheer power and ruthlessness, where the strong always exploit the weak and where violence is the ultimate regulating mechanism. This perspective also places Cambodia in a recently invented category of 'post-conflict' countries suffering from pervasive violence and traumatic collective fragmentation, with a certain set of problems requiring a certain set of measures which fit the essentialised understanding of its political culture.[5] This seems to construe a self-perpetuating process which further reifies the perception of an ever-present and determinant, non-changing Khmer political culture.

However, one can question whether this circular rationality adequately reflects the changes currently taking place 'out there'; there are, after all, scattered but increasingly frequent reports of social and political change emerging in Cambodia, and the changing institutional framework for local politics is evident.[6] In particular, the reform known as

Cambodia (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1993); Thion, 'What is the meaning of "community" in Cambodia?', *Cambodia Development Review*, 3, 3 (1999): 12–13; Judy Ledgerwood, 'Rural development in Cambodia: The view from the village', in *Cambodia and the international community: The quest for peace, development, and democracy*, ed. Frederick Z. Brown and David G. Timberman (New York and Singapore: Asia Society and ISEAS, 1998), pp. 127–48; Jan Ovesen, Ing-Britt Trankell and Joakim Öjendal, *When every household is an island: Social organisation and power structures in rural Cambodia* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Department of Cultural Anthropology, 1996); Ovesen, 'Political violence in Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge "genocide"', in *No peace no war: An anthropology of contemporary armed conflicts*, ed. Paul Richards (Athens, OH and Oxford: Ohio University Press and James Currey, 2005), pp. 22–39.

3 Ibid., and David Chandler, 'The burden of Cambodia's past', in Brown and Timberman ed., *Cambodia and the international community*, pp. 33–48.

4 World Bank, *Legal and judicial reform mission: Aide-memoire* (Phnom Penh: World Bank, 2004); see also Peter Blunt and Mark Turner, 'Decentralisation, democracy and development in a post-conflict society: Commune councils in Cambodia', in *Public Administration and Development*, 25 (2005): 75–87.

5 Willem van de Put, 'An assessment of the community in Cambodia', unpublished mimeograph (Phnom Penh, 1997); Fabienne Luco, *Between the tiger and the crocodile: A social anthropological approach to traditional and new practices of management of local conflicts in Cambodia* (UNESCO Report, 2003); Chandler, 'Burden of Cambodia's past'; United Nations Development Program, *Lessons learned in crises and post-conflict situation: The role of UNDP in reintegration and reconstruction programmes* (New York: UNDP, 2002); Seanglim Bit, *The warrior heritage: A psychological perspective of Cambodian trauma* (El Cerrito, CA: The author, 1991); and Suzannah Linton, *Reconciliation in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Centre of Cambodia, 2004).

6 Joakim Öjendal, 'Decentralisation as political commodity in Cambodia', in *Southeast Asian responses to globalisation: Restructuring governance and deepening democracy*, ed. Francis Loh Kok Wah and Öjendal (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2005), pp. 287–315; Kim Sedara, 'Reciprocity: Informal patterns of social interactions in a village near Angkor Park, Cambodia' (M.A. thesis, Northern Illinois University, 2001); John McAndrew, 'Experiences of Commune Councils in promoting participatory local governance' (Phnom Penh: Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, 2004); Caroline Rusten *et al.*, *The challenges of the decentralisation design in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Development Research Institute, 2004); Robin Biddulph, *PAT empowerment study – final report* (Phnom Penh: Partnership for Local Government, 2003).

'democratic decentralisation' has put a face on this proposed change.[7] In essence, this article does not challenge the conception of Cambodian political culture discussed above, but it contests the widespread assumption that this culture cannot change, or rather that actors within it cannot 'act against their culture' even if they have a good reason. In other words, the notion of Cambodia as an unchanging 'conservative society' where destiny is infinitely determined by its historical culture is questioned.[8] Thus we contrast the paradigm of the essentialised, consistent and conservative 'Khmer political culture' with views on 'rational behaviour' and 'agency', putting emphasis on actors and their ability to react in response to the changing political context and institutional structures in rural Cambodia.

From a theoretical perspective, this article rests on the assumption of a dialectical relation between structure and agency. Influenced by Anthony Giddens's 'theory of structuration', we regard agency and structure as mutually dependent in the sense that neither of them can exist in isolation, and we argue that agency has been neglected in studies of rural change in Cambodia. We thus do not accept explanations of outcome from a structural perspective alone, but strive for a 'central amalgamation' in interaction and interdependence between structure and agency.[9] That is, we thrive on what may appear as – and have often been taken for granted as – empirical structure-agency incompatibilities and suggest an analysis of these 'incompatibilities' between Khmer political culture and the demands of individual initiative, change and participation integrated in the ideational goods of decentralisation reform.

Below we explore the interaction of Khmer political culture (as understood in the literature) with the ambitions for political change encapsulated in the ongoing process of decentralisation. The latter contains a number of elements which, to be successful, demand reversals of key traits in the culture – traits which are to some extent imputed to Khmers by academic analysts of that culture. Our study is founded upon the assumption that neither the reform nor the political practices can remain 'intact', but that a 'central amalgamation' will take place. That is, we expect a dialectical process in which structure and agency interact in a dynamic process with as yet unknown outcomes. Empirically, we will look at how 'democratic decentralisation' possibly triggers agency among a number of broadly defined and strategically situated 'actors', namely Commune (*sangkat*) Councils and councillors (the practices of local governance), people in general (popular political discourse), organised civil society (the responses of NGOs and local associations to political change) and women aspiring to a political role (the changing role of women in local politics). Let us first, however, review the basics of the ongoing

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7   Ernesto Bautista, Sak Setha and Prum Sokha, 'Decentralizing the state', paper presented at the Second International Conference on Decentralisation, Manila, 25–27 July 2002; Christine Mansfield and Kurt MacLeod, *Commune Council and civil society: Promoting decentralisation through partnership* (Phnom Penh: Private Agency for Collaborating Together [PACT], 2004); Caroline Hughes and Kim Sedara, *A study of conflict resolution mechanisms in relation to the national elections in 2003* (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Development Research Institute Working Paper Number 30, 2004); Royal Government of Cambodia, 'Administrative reform and good governance', in *Consultative group meeting on Cambodia*, Paris, 24–26 May 2000, vol. I.

8   For an example of this assumption see Martin, *Cambodia: A shattered society*.

9   Anthony Giddens, *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984); see also Berth Danermark *et al.*, *Att förklara samhället* [To explain society] (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1997).

decentralisation reform and how this could be expected to relate to the assigned political culture.

Decentralisation in Cambodia: A participatory revolution or power politics as usual?

Democratic procedures have been in place since 1993, including three technically sophisticated national elections and a number of political institutions. Participatory development is being pursued through programmes such as the Cambodia Area Rehabilitation and Regeneration Project (CARERE) and Seila with a certain degree of success, inside and outside of state structures.[10] More concretely, in 2002 the Law on the Administration and Management of the Communes (LAMC) and the Commune Election Law (CEL) were passed. These laws constituted the formal start of a decentralising reform, and it is within this process that we focus our empirical study on rural agency. 'Local elections' were called for with the organisation of national elections in 1993, but their implementation was repeatedly delayed and seemingly met with severe resistance from within the state apparatus. Beginning in 1998, however, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) – which has responsibility *inter alia* for public administration – pursued the idea of massive decentralisation.

At first appearing as a strange creature in the centralistic political culture of Cambodia, decentralisation soon started to make sense to certain dominant political interests. At stake was political control over rural areas, which now became crucial in national elections. Until the mid-1990s the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) comfortably controlled the rural areas, but with the introduction of liberal democratic procedures and the dismantling of the previous centralist plan economy, this control crumbled.[11] In short, it can be concluded that attracting rural voters became increasingly essential for power struggles on a national scale. When crude repression was no longer feasible because of the formal acceptance of a new political system, and nor were generous patronage politics because of a lack of funds, governance practices at local level had to be replaced with more popularly attractive modes of governance.

The reform of decentralisation has passed through all available mechanisms for consultation and has been formally adopted by the National Assembly. This should not, however, obscure the fact that there are vested interests involved. For instance, since the

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10 'Seila' ('foundation stone') is a programme for channelling donor foods through local government for community-based projects. Hugh Evans, *Strategic evaluation of CARERE* (Stockholm: Swedish International Development Agency, 2000); Jan Rudengren and Joakim Öjendal, *Learning by doing: An analysis of the Seila experience in Cambodia* (Stockholm: Swedish International Development Agency, Department of Natural Resources, 2002). The statement that democratic procedures are 'in place' does not carry any value judgement on the quality and depth of the democratic process or on the nature of these political institutions. For treatment of these issues, see David W. Roberts, *Political transition in Cambodia 1991–99: Power elitism and democracy* (London: Curzon, 2001); Pierre P. Lizee, *Peace, power and resistance in Cambodia: Global governance and the failure of international conflict resolution* (London: Macmillan, 2000); Caroline Hughes, *The political economy of Cambodia's transition, 1991–2001* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); and Sorpong Peou, *Intervention and change in Cambodia: Towards democracy?* (Singapore and Bangkok: ISEAS and Silkworm Books, 2000). Similarly, the discussion below does not engage the question of whether decentralisation is being successfully implemented or not. We assume, however, that there has been a movement towards democracy over the last decade and that decentralisation reform exerts pressure for change locally.

11 See Öjendal, 'Decentralisation as political commodity'.

reform is being initiated by the Ministry of the Interior [MoI] and puts power and money in the hands of Commune Councils under its own authority, other ministries are not necessarily equally enthusiastic. Moreover, the broader public-sector reform outlining relations between the vertically arranged line ministries and the 'bottom-up' Commune Councils still remains to be sorted out. Currently, the lack of harmonisation in this regard may be seen as the single largest threat to decentralisation reform. Building up the legitimacy and powers of these Councils also represents a threat to other layers of government such as the district and province, and are critical issues with regard to the overall success of the reform.[12] They are, however, slightly outside the focus of this article, which is mainly concerned with the process whereby the idea of decentralisation meets political culture in rural areas.

Reforms include local elections aimed at producing Commune Councils, which are given a wide-ranging legal mandate to administer local society. The Council's responsibilities include overseeing a 'budget and planning committee' with village representation, producing a commune development plan with bottom-up methods, negotiating in a transparent manner with contractors for small-scale infrastructural construction, encouraging broad-based participation, handling civil registration (of individuals and households) and solving local conflicts. It is also outlined in the law – although instructions for this have yet to be issued – that the Commune Council can draft and promulgate laws, collect taxes, manage certain natural resources, provide security, support village democracy and insert a certain degree of 'development dynamic' into rural society. The Council is, moreover, free to receive funding from the central government as well as from external sources like donors and NGOs. The ultimate aim of decentralisation reform, as expressed by a high-ranking government official, is to promote pluralistic and participatory local democracy and to contribute to the reduction of poverty. The discourse surrounding the reform has been permeated by statements concerning the attempts to reverse previous top-down practices, reduce the distance between people and the authorities and allow a constituency to vote out of office Commune Councillors guilty of mismanagement.[13] The laws are quite bold, essentially creating a second layer of government with certain independent powers.[14]

In other words, the nature of governance at the local level is expected to move toward becoming a mirror image of the stereotypes of Khmer political culture; in the

12 Kingdom of Cambodia Ministry of Interior [henceforth MoI], 'Reform of sub-national governance: Draft policy framework paper and way forward', mimeographed document, 2004; Blunt and Turner, 'Decentralisation'.

13 The statement on the overall objective of decentralisation is from Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng's remarks at the National Symposium on Decentralisation and Local Governance, Phnom Penh, 15–16 May 2002. Although democracy as such has taken root in terms of free multiparty elections, the system of party lists makes it difficult to 'punish' individuals through the ballot. Indirectly, however, the party to which an unpopular councillor belongs can be punished. As happened in the first election in 2002, it is thus likely that a party will remove candidates who are foreseen to deter voters.

14 For an overview of the issues and objectives see David Ayres, *Decentralisation: A review of literature* (Phnom Penh: Commune Council Support Project, 2001). At this point a distinction needs to be made between, on the one hand, our belief that there will be some sort of change occurring whereby local actors will be given increased democratic space and, on the other, the possibility that the optimal justification for the reform may be entirely different as seen from the strategic and political actors' point of view (see Öjendal, 'Decentralisation as political commodity'). This does, however, not alter the above reasoning.

process, it is anticipated that 'new methods' will be applied. This is a tall order, however. As Ian Mabbett and David Chandler have noted, the mustering of popular legitimacy has never been a source of power in Cambodia, and has never been successfully tried.[15] Here it is being attempted. Much of the debate leading up to the reform and the first election focused on whether or not such an attempt was conceivable. Though it was generally anticipated that this new 'invention' was not going to succeed, early indications do suggest that there has been a certain shift in governance practices, and that this is to some extent recognised by the rural population.[16] Hypothetically change is occurring beyond a rhetorical level, allowing us to claim that the 'standard' representations of Cambodian political culture are not reasonable reflections of actual change. The outcome in this assumed contradiction is fundamentally an empirical question. We will assess it through a brief investigation of four key areas: attitude changes with local authorities, popular discourses on decentralisation, the preparedness of civil society to utilise the newly opened political space and the possibility for women to access (and alter) the political sphere.

A new quality to local governance: From ontological insecurity to popular legitimacy?

One of the more concrete changes in local governance is meant to be a shift from the crude exercise of power to the building of legitimate local government through participatory practices.[17] Is such a shift in attitudes currently occurring among the civil servants and within the Commune Councils? Societies moving out of long-term extreme violence harbour people who suffer from 'ontological insecurity'.[18] Similar problems have been identified in rural Cambodia and have possibly been a source of what has been described as 'development fatigue' and 'social fragmentation'.[19] People in this context are generally sensitive to fears of resumed violence and the exercise of violence-impregnated power; especially if crude power is pursued on illegitimate grounds and by autocratic methods. It is also well documented that there is an overall lack of general trust in rural Cambodian society, further impeding the establishment of local government legitimacy.[20] The Vietnamese military presence during 1979–89 (when defence was organised at the commune level), the forced conscription of young men into the military and/or forced

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15 Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers* (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 1995), p. 164; Chandler, 'Burden of Cambodia's past', p. 44.
16 Rusten *et al.*, *Challenges* and McAndrew, 'Experiences of Commune Councils'; Marita Eastmond and Joakim Öjendal, *The role of the commune in participatory development in rural Cambodia* (Stockholm: Swedish International Development Authority, 1999); Öjendal, 'Decentralisation as political commodity'; and Ayres, *Decentralisation: A review*.
17 MoI, 'Reform', p. 5.
18 Robert L. Rothstein, *After the peace: Resistance and reconciliation* (London: Rienner, 1999); Andrew Rigby, *Justice and reconciliation after the violence* (London: Rienner, 2001); Jean-Paul Lederach, *Building peace. Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
19 Grant Curtis, *Cambodia reborn? The transition to democracy and development* (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1998); Ovesen *et al.*, *When every household*; Chandler, 'Burden of Cambodia's past'. On problems related to 'ontological insecurity' see van de Put, 'Assessment', and Luco, *Between the tiger*.
20 Hughes and Kim, *Study of conflict resolution*.

labour in dangerous conditions (such as the 'K-5 programme' in western Cambodia in the mid-1980s), and the violence connected to the elections in the early 1990s, are examples of how power was exercised over villagers at the commune level.[21] Other examples of minor but still important abuses of power by commune authorities are the frequent instances of day-to-day corruption, unjust allocation of resources and occasional work opportunities, and foot-dragging in the issuing of necessary certificates and permits in order to solicit bribes from the applicants.

For many people, the local state has never brought any good and has only been a source of insecurity and problems. The benefits of 'having a state' have never been evident.[22] Nor has the commune office ever been a powerhouse for development activities.[23] On the contrary, when rebuilding the collapsed state in the acute post-conflict situation of the 1980s, commune authorities under the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government had to extract a 'surplus' from the desperately poor rural population, forcibly organise collective work and conscript people into the army. They had to cooperate with the increasingly disliked Vietnamese occupation force while facing subtle resistance and avoidance on the part of the population under their authority. From the outset of this new attempt at building a nation-state, commune authorities were not (and could hardly be) popular. Though to some extent initially assuming a 'rescuing' role, local authorities gradually came to exercise one of control and suppression; particularly progressive segments of society held very sceptical views on the activities of these authorities.[24] After the peace agreement of 1991 and the elections of 1993, with the spread of democratic values and a decrease in security threats, there was less justification for applying or accepting these authoritarian methods. Hence, political legitimacy dropped, and the control of rural areas became difficult, resulting in a fragmentation of political power from the central level over those areas. This problem was identified by the central state apparatus as early as 1994:

> Since the Cambodia Government was formulated, it has generally been observed that the commune authorities within some provinces seem to be reluctant to perform their duties and tasks, and that their commitment towards the responsibilities of managing the administration and public security in local areas has [loosened]. The main reason for these [problems] is that they are waiting to see the outcome of the election of commune [authorities] as prescribed in the National Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia.[25]

21 Judy Ledgerwood and John Vijghen, 'Decision-making in rural Khmer villages', in *Cambodia emerges from the past: Eight essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University, 2002), pp. 109–50. 'K-5' was a massive attempt at physically clearing the forest and erecting fences in order to get the upper hand in the civil war; Margaret Slocomb, 'The K5 gamble: National defence and nation building under the People's Republic of Kampuchea', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32, 2 (2001): 195–210.
22 Eastmond and Öjendal, *Role of the commune*.
23 Joel Charny, 'Issues for decentralized planning and financing of rural development in Cambodia', *Regional Development Dialogue*, 20, 2 (1999): 176–94.
24 Caroline Hughes, 'Human rights in Cambodia: International intervention and the national response' (Ph.D. diss., University of Hull, 1998).
25 MoI, Instruction No. 324, 10 May 1994, unofficial translation. For scholarly discussions of this problem, see Sorpong, *Intervention and change*; Hughes, *Political economy*; Malin Hasselskog, *Local governance in transition: Villagers' perceptions and Seila's impact* (Phnom Penh: CARERE, 2000); Viviane Frings, 'Cambodia after decollectivisation (1989–1992)', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 24, 1 (1994): 49–66; and Joakim Öjendal, 'Sharing the good: modes of managing water resources in the lower Mekong River basin' (Ph.D. diss., University of Göteborg, 2000).

In addition to – or as a result of – waning political legitimacy and governance capacity, local development stalled, and rural poverty persisted and even deepened.

It is against this backdrop that the current decentralisation reform must be seen. The effort to engage people in development and in the local political process is part of an attempt to break the vicious circle just described by reconstructing political legitimacy and kick-starting local development and poverty alleviation.[26] The key to this vision may be to rework local governance practices. The reform opens this door, but do the commune authorities have the ability – and the will – to walk through it?

One important element is the fact that the Commune Councillors are now elected. Although the election is based on party lists, the Councillors are there because people voted for them and their party. As noted above, a popular vote has never been a source of power for Cambodian rulers. However, if (as seems to be the case now) there are centrally determined laws and decrees to the effect that this is the valid system, democratic space increases – irrespective of whether that is the actual intent of the reform. The drawback is that central powers can always reverse this policy, which may constitute a major vulnerability of the reform.[27] By contrast, the widespread concern among outsiders that an attitudinal shift from the side of the Commune Councillors could not occur may be overstated. For one thing, the local election disciplined parties, rooted out the most unpopular of the 'old guard' and left behind a more reform-oriented cadre. This was a conscious move on the part of the CPP, which was well aware that unpopular commune chiefs cost them votes in national elections.[28] Moreover, the officials themselves were not necessarily 'good' or 'bad'; rather, they were sensitive to central directives, and they still are. When asked directly whether it has been difficult to shift attitudes and methods of work towards a more participatory style, a typical answer from commune chiefs was: 'No, it is much better to work with a bottom-up strategy. People do not get angry and our investments better fit the people's needs.' To the question why, if this method was better, they did not use it before, the simple answer was typically that at the time, 'they [the central level] had another system', and 'we had to comply'.[29]

A second point to consider is that there is now a framework working at the commune level and training is offered for capacity-building at that level. In theory,

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26 MoI, 'Reform'.

27 Here we encounter a paradox: decentralisation, including increased democratic space at the local level, may have been introduced in order to consolidate power on a national level for the dominant party. It may even be the case that a successful and popular decentralisation reform, if it manages to increase political participation and reduce poverty, will serve to further consolidate the power of the dominant party, a development which may not necessarily serve to deepen democracy at the national level.

28 Rusten *et al.*, *Challenges*; Hughes and Kim, *Study of conflict resolution*.

29 These responses were extracted from our qualitative interviews and deemed important in that they seemed to represent generally held views among Commune Councillors. The possible representation of these attitudes is currently being followed up in a quantitative survey: Joakim Öjendal and Kim Sedara, 'Starting from below: Local democracy as a first step towards post-conflict reconstruction in Cambodia', in *In search of political legitimacy in Cambodia*, ed. Öjendal and Mona Lilja (Copenhagen: NIAS, forthcoming). Moreover, while regional differences can be detected, these are likely attributable mainly to the differing degrees of exposure to participatory development projects like CARERE/Seila. Finally, whereas these attitudes are common, actual practices seem to vary with the individual 'style' of a particular commune chief.

at least, other levels of government are aware of the system and are supporting the Commune Councils in their new line of work, and it now makes sense for the latter to make an extra effort. In reality, of course, all kinds of shortcomings appear, such as the inability to handle financial accounts, manage projects and pursue development planning.[30] Moreover, as noted above, the key problem may be the role of decentralisation in the overall reform of the national administration. It is far from clear that other government agencies are prepared to accept the fairly independent role given the Commune Councils, causing the latter to have dysfunctional relations with, for instance, the various ministries administered at the province level.

However, for many Commune Councillors a progressive framework as in decentralisation reform is not a headache – as is often assumed – but a blessing. A period of anarchy (in terms of governance) with limited resource flow, when they were never appreciated but only blamed for wrongdoings, may now be replaced by a popular framework within which they can work with some degree of security, and with a reasonable chance of achieving success. There is no doubt that many Councillors now experience an overall feeling of great relief. In their own perception, the opportunity to learn and to change may be a source of pride. As one commune chief observed,

> In this commune, like other communes, decentralisation [is] new because it has just been implemented for two years. Everyone in the Council is trying hard to learn and do at the same time. Even though it is new, we are making good progress. An example of this is [the] increase in participation from people in development planning, local contributions in terms of both labour and cash, and other development outcomes. At the same time, we are also facing some difficulties in the area of technical issues such as environment, forestry, and fishery. In terms of attitude, people are the 'owners of power'. In a general sense, people now are happy with [the] changing of leadership style from top-down to bottom-up.[31]

Most importantly, for the first time ever, the Commune Council has a predictable development budget to work with, as well as salary and reimbursement for their expenses. Depending on the size of the commune, the Commune/Sangkat Fund (CSF) amounts to approximately US$8,000 per year per commune, making ideas of participation and development planning both credible and useful. More importantly, it becomes feasible to generate local legitimacy which can substitute for authoritarianism. For many councillors – contrary to what is widely believed in the community of international development workers – this constitutes progress.

However, as Judy Ledgerwood notes, patronage is a likely result of democratisation (and, we could add, of 'imperfect' liberal economics) since it is taken to be an integral part of Khmer political culture.[32] This is also in line with the general criticism made of decentralisation, namely that top-down authoritarianism risks being replaced not with participatory democracy, but with 'local fiefdoms' characterised by nepotism, corruption

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30 McAndrew, 'Experiences of Commune Councils'; Mansfield and MacLeod, *Commune Council*; Rusten *et al.*, *Challenges*.
31 Commune chief, interview, 5 May 2004.
32 Ledgerwood, 'Rural development', pp. 144–5.

and the establishment of non-democratic, non-transparent chains of patronage. Such a change would impede local development as efficiently as top-down authoritarianism ever did. Furthermore, as happened at the central level in Cambodia in the early 1990s, the sudden emergence of money at the local level risks triggering corruption and financial mismanagement, as technical incapacity, cultural traits and raw poverty cross-fertilise each other, enhancing the risk of widespread misuse of resources and/or decreasing political legitimacy due to suspicions of such misuse. So far, the reform has been tightly controlled, and a limited quantity of resources is flowing freely. No major financial 'scandals' have been unearthed, although such rumours are frequent, and miscellaneous 'fees' are proliferating. The final twist may be that the relatively open climate in the rural areas now makes it possible for villagers to inform concerned parties and other authorities about such allegations, possibly reducing the risk of corruption.

Discursive reflections: The state of change and the change of state

The most obvious way to acquire a broad understanding of the perceived political change may be to consider how the decentralisation process is viewed by people in general; how it is being discussed in an everyday sense; how it is being interpreted, received, understood and socially constructed; and to what extent it is being talked about at all. No good Khmer word for 'decentralisation' exists. The official term '*wee macha ka*' literally conveys the sense of 'out from the centre', but in a vague and unclear way not previously used in political language. It is not comprehensible to ordinary people, barely so to Commune Councillors, and does not even really make sense to educated Khmers in its current usage. Nevertheless, because of the lack of political terminology for expressing how the state can be downwardly accountable and how power can emanate from anywhere except from the 'top', '*wee macha ka*' has been adopted as the official Khmer term for the current process. The fact that the expression is not used at all in rural areas by ordinary people, or even by commune authorities, may indicate – or perhaps even lead to – an overall lack of awareness of the nature of the political change and its existence as an ongoing process. Hence, there is a risk that the reform will suffer from popular neglect, shallowness and unsustainability, or that the actual change taking place (discursively or otherwise) will remain limited – more or less in line with the sceptics' view.

However, the phrase '*tang pi ka bos chnaot khum*' (literally, 'since the commune election') is universally recognised everywhere and by virtually everybody. In fact, the event is considered a dividing line in the politics of rural areas. Although political awareness is not very high in rural Cambodia, four political events tend to be remembered: independence from the French, the Khmer Rouge takeover (and its reversal after the Vietnamese invasion), the UNTAC era, and '*tang pi ka bos chnaot khum*'.[33] To some extent this may reflect the recent occurrence of the reform, but it seems beyond doubt that '*tang pi ka bos chnaot khum*' is emerging as a milestone in the ordering of the passing of time as well as in the understanding of political changes taking place locally.

33 UNTAC was the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia between March 1992 and September 1993; it administered the first post-war elections and was an integral part of the peace process.

The fact that the official term '*wee macha ka*' is not used thus does not mean either that the process is not perceived or that it is not talked about. In a general sense, decentralisation – or rather the change of attitudes and working methods on the part of local authorities – is thoroughly imbedded in a benign discourse. '*Pheap chea daikou*', '(working together) as a pair of hands', is used to describe the nature of the change to indicate a new relation between the local state and the people – one marked by greater equality, mutual respect and less distance. This change can typically be seen during development planning with the inclusion of village chiefs and Village Development Committees (VDCs). Moreover, the way that Commune Councils gather information is surprisingly bottom-up and participatory. Although village meetings by no means draw the entire population, they are often qualitatively good exercises which serve to build mutual confidence, and they go a long way to help people understand the mandates and working methods of the Councils. It is unlikely that the metaphor of *pheap chea daikou* would ever have been used to describe the 'old' commune authorities. Another 'new judgement' of the local authorities is '*mean tomlar pheap*' (possessing transparency), reflecting – somewhat formally but still with a soft tone – the need to exercise authority with 'transparency' and the fact that all stakeholders have a right to be heard.

What may make development practitioners happy is that the development discourse is making headway into rural Khmer. '*Pheap chea marchas*' ('[people] being the owners', reflecting the fashionable concept of 'ownership') is sometimes heard now; so is '*karchoul roup douysmark chit*' (literally, 'wanting to do with the heart'), expressing a voluntary but also appreciative sentiment on the part of ordinary people *vis-à-vis* the local authorities. '*Karchoul roup pi praheachun*' is a popularly used vernacular expression of 'people's participation' which is often used to describe the emerging situation. A commune chief in Kampong Speu summarised the situation as he sees it:

> After the commune election, we now have more people at the commune level. We can allocate different people to be responsible for different villages in the commune. This way we can inform villagers directly. Now we must work hard to get consensus from people, which is different from previous regimes when we had to implement the order from the top. In other words, now we work bottom-up, before we worked top-down. This is good for us because now people see we do not use power and we listen to them. If [we] do so [but] still cannot respond to their needs, people trust us [anyway].[34]

Although to some extent rhetorical – and certainly more frequently used by officials – these expressions are in stark contrast to the previous discourse surrounding the local authorities: distance, fear and contempt. Cambodians commonly respond to the expression '*rot amnach*' (state authority) with a shiver and think of it as defining the situation that used to prevail, reflecting the commune's autocracy and authority. That is, the combination of a single person (the commune chief) in power and the crude authority he (for the chief was almost always a man) often chose to exercise is remembered as hugely uncomfortable and connected to war, violence and general insecurity. '*Rot amnach*' is a harsh expression articulating the impression of the commune chief as the single source of crude power which has no accountability and cannot be resisted; it is now contrasted

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34 Commune chief, Kompong Speu, interview, 3 May 2004.

with '*Krom Preuksar Khum*' (Commune Councillor, emphasising that one discusses matters and collective decisions are being made) and '*neaq dail pracheachon bos chnaot oy*' ('[Commune Councils] are elected by the people', emphasising that the Council consists of elected individuals). Whereas '*rot amnach*' has strongly negative connotations, both of the latter expressions are associated with soft and positive values.

This phenomenon represents a discursive paradigm shift; that is, in the eyes of ordinary people, commune authorities no longer by definition represent repressive authoritarianism. They can, of course, 're-earn' their bad reputation through bad behaviour, as had occurred in one commune we visited. In terms of discontent with the behaviour of the Commune Councils, however, *klach* (fear) and *rot amnach* seem to have been replaced with *pouk rolouy* (corruption) and *pakpourk bangphoun niyum* (nepotism). The female head of a fishing community, for instance, commented that 'I went to see the commune chief many times but [he only received me] one [time] out of ten. This commune chief is still paying a lot of favours toward his own friends and political party members. He pays little respect to the marginalized villagers like us.'[35] Interestingly, this commune's inhabitants, though dissatisfied with the chief's attempts at autocratic governance, were neither cowed into silence nor frightened by him, as they had once been. As a village chief in personal conflict with this particular man expressed it, 'Since the commune election, people tend to understand their rights and freedoms better. Before they avoided meetings because of fear. Now they appear. Some even use their new rights to refuse to contribute to joint projects.'[36] The commune chief in question, moreover, readily acknowledged his now formally limited powers as well as the need to earn local legitimacy, while defending his right to exercise authority within the limits of his legal powers.

Can it be argued, then, that we are witnessing an astonishing reversal of cultural traits? Probably not, for distance from – and respect towards – the commune in particular and higher-level state authorities in general remain. Villagers are still expected to demonstrate *korob, kaud, klach* – 'respect, admiration, fear' – towards the local authorities and their civil servants. However, in lively discussions, commune authorities proudly emphasised that the balance among the three words has shifted. Villagers' dealings with these authorities used to be characterised by *klach*, and in good cases some *korob*, but very little *kaud*; now, there is a lot of *korob* and some *kaud*, but not so much *klach*. (The single most remarkable observation in the villages is the opinion that fear is much less pronounced now, and that the general atmosphere is sharply different).

In the same context – a sophisticated discussion on the role of the new commune authorities – it was also suggested that even when working in a bottom-up fashion and with democratic ideals, *klach* had its place, and so did the other components. The ideal situation is to have a balance among the three. Most importantly, *kaud* is 'in the middle', combining with *korob* and *klach* to make them manageable. If 'admiration' is genuine, 'respect' is healthy, and 'fear' allows the authorities space to operate. It is important to note that although the expression '*korob, kaud, klach*' is fairly easy to translate, its meaning varies depending on the relative weight of the three terms and how they are

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35 Interview, 5 May 2004.
36 Village chief, interview, 4 May 2004.

made to relate to each other. For instance, '*klach*' in itself is a distinctly negative feeling, but in combination with '*korob*' or '*kaud*' it creates a more acceptable or even desirable situation.

So what does this shift of terminology actually mean? What separates a hegemonic insertion of trendy development lingo, popularly used out of docility and respect for authorities and foreign donors, from the use of words as a true shift of conceptions and worldviews, indicating a popular and lasting change with unforeseen consequences? Ultimately we cannot know yet; only time will tell. However, the very fact that these sentiments are expressed in Khmer terms and with familiar and locally recognisable expressions (with the exception of *wee macha ka*) suggests a certain depth and 'genuineness'. If there really is a shifting usage of words, the likelihood of a change towards 'softer' governance is higher, and the chances for sustainability better. There is thus a popularly vested interest in using this language, to put pressure on commune authorities to 'make' the reform succeed. What we may know already is that judging from the above, at the very least a pathological dimension of fear in the relation between people and the state and between villagers and Commune Councils has been (partially) removed, and we may observe an alteration of the discourse surrounding local government, which would make possible new perceptions of that government. We may thus see the birth of a discourse supporting the idea that the state can be benign and exercise power on a popular mandate for the common good. This would be a major change.

A civil society emerging from 'fatigue'?

It has been argued by various scholars that Cambodian civil society is historically docile, further fragmented by the recent decades of violence, cowed into apathy by authoritarian politics and belittled by a patronising donor community.[37] These perspectives present a dilemma in this context since with decentralisation it is assumed that civil society is organised and is pursuing development efforts and acting as a partner to the local government, while emerging as a political watchdog and pressure group acting with political vigilance and vigour. The decentralisation process as a whole has also been analysed with the conclusion that only through the dynamic interaction between the state and the civil society/private sector can its potential be realised.[38] The issue of agency is thus a key dimension in determining whether the reform will ever 'take off'.

Although a convincing argument has recently been made that organic ties in Khmer villages are stronger and more complex than what has commonly been acknowledged, by any standard the degree of formal organisation (as in local NGOs and/or voluntary associations) has historically been extremely limited and marked by a low degree of general trust.[39] Throughout the 1990s, excluding the organisations crafted by the foreign

37 Mabbett and Chandler, *Khmers*, and Bit, *Warrior heritage*, give a historical perspective. Luco, *Between the tiger*, discusses fragmentation and Curtis, *Cambodia reborn?*, apathy. On the donor community see Hughes, *Political economy*, ch. 7.
38 Caroline Rusten and Joakim Öjendal, 'Poverty reduction through decentralisation? Lessons from elsewhere and challenges for Cambodia', *Cambodia Development Review*, 7, 4 (2003): 1–5. On civil society see also a forthcoming study by Kim Sedara *et al.* to be published by the Cambodia Development Research Institute in Phnom Penh.
39 Hughes and Kim, *Study of conflict resolution*; the discussion of village ties is in Kim, 'Reciprocity'.

development industry, the 'Wat [temple] Committee' would typically be the only non-governmental group in most villages and communes. This phenomenon could be understood as resulting from a combination of historical aversion to collective formations, the current low level of education and the lack of political space for extra-state organisations over the last four decades – or, if one likes, the last century-and-a-half.

The contextual conditions and current practices are changing, however. Fear of dissidence has diminished significantly, and in a dramatic reversal of previous politics, NGOs are now encouraged to work on development issues locally. In addition to the NGOs crafted from the outside, locally based development-oriented organisations (like water user associations), functional arrangements (like funeral associations) and rights-based organisations (like fishing and forestry communities) are proliferating. There is little doubt that the organisational density in rural Cambodia is increasing rapidly.[40]

Historically, the state has had a monopoly on political power, but with the emerging 'NGO culture' this power has started to become diluted; predictably, tensions arise. Two typical situations can be identified. In the first, the Commune Council is helpful, attempting to – in a benign way – co-opt and thereby assert influence over the growing NGO activity. The 'gut reaction' of the Councils is a sense of uneasiness over their inability to properly 'coordinate' and direct the work of the NGOs; this feeling may be a legacy of the planned economy or a reflection of traditional political culture. At times it may be as explicit as officials seeking top positions in the NGOs/associations in question. (In one Commune Council we visited, all seven councillors were members of wat committees in various parts of the commune. In another, the commune chief was also the chairman of the local water user association.) This form of co-optation draws suspicions of elite capture, whereas representatives of NGOs/associations typically see themselves as more closely affiliated with ordinary people than a Commune Councillor could be. In the other typical case there is intentional and mutual neglect or ignorance of each other's activities. Some NGOs make a point of no longer having to seek permission from commune authorities, who in turn cannot do much about the presence of these organisations other than occasionally questioning their good intensions and honesty. From the people in general we detected only positive sentiments regarding the emergence of the NGOs.

There is also a third situation where certain NGOs have an objective which runs directly counter to, or at least challenges, the authority of the Commune Council. In many places local conflicts over resources are emerging independently from the decentralisation reform. In most of these cases, there is little the commune authorities can do because they do not have the legal mandate and/or the power to address the

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40 One village in Siem Reap had the following committees: Temple Association, School and Parents, Irrigation, Fishing, Planning and Budgeting (linked to the Commune Council), Micro-credit and a Midwife Association. In a commune in Battambang the committees included: Temple Association, Planning and Budgeting, School and Parents, Fishing (several groups), Village Development, Dry-Season Rice Cultivation, Helping the Aged and Women's Issues. In both these cases, the vast majority of these NGOs were founded in 2000 or later (Kim and Öjendal, *Annual Development Review*, CDRI, forthcoming). While, surprisingly, many such associations have a direct relation to the decentralisation reform, they also benefited from a gradual liberalisation from 1993 onwards.

problem properly.[41] Sometimes people, with the support of NGOs, blame the Council for not solving the problem. The NGOs (for instance, associations for fishing communities' rights) then become pressure groups exercising their civil rights, which is exactly what they are supposed to do – theoretically and normatively – under a reform of democratic decentralisation.

Ideally, this would be the trend in several areas such as budget control, legal issues, corruption, etc. However, while not entirely uncommon, this is not typically the case. The idea '*pnort chas nouv dordeil*' (the old way of thinking remains the same), implicitly expressing reluctance to challenge authority, prevails. For many, questioning the local authorities may in the short run seem counterproductive to a good decentralisation process, because of a combination of the ingrained political culture and sheer ignorance. Moreover, it should be pointed out that although there has been a distinct change in both the attitude of local authorities and the activity of local civil society, for a poor uneducated peasant there is still a huge distance between him- or herself and the Commune Council. Finally, it should be acknowledged that civil society in general exercises good judgement in realising how limited the Councils' capacity to alter structural problems actually is.

There is no doubt that over the last five years, the proliferation of NGOs has accelerated, and increasingly this development is taking place without specific foreign support or investment. As a result, the web of local power-holders, interests and agendas is evolving into a more complex structure, and acceptance of challenges to the classic mono-structural power formation is slowly growing. Moreover, the local authorities themselves have an interest in the emergence of an active civil society dealing with development issues, and they often personally take part in the evolution of these NGOs/associations. In most cases, however, the limitations on what is deemed feasible come into play when there is a need to openly oppose local authorities. There is still little space within the prevailing political culture for the idea of 'benign opposition' and 'constructive criticism'; and while NGOs provide an increasing organisational heterogeneity, it would be a mistake to view them as politically powerful in a strict sense.

The gendering (or not) of local politics[42]

Identifying how and when gender is important in terms of women's participation and influence is crucial in the emerging local political scene. However, below we also attempt to move beyond a focus solely on women and inquire into how gendered practices function in sustaining (or not sustaining) governance as a structurally 'male' sphere. Thus, in addition to performing a 'body count' of female participation, we will attempt a brief structural analysis to assess the extent to which governance has turned 'more female'.

In Khmer political culture it is common for women to be discursively 'made' weak, vulnerable and subordinate to men. Consequently, historically they have not been

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41 Article 43 of the Law on Administration and Management of the Commune states that the Commune Council has responsibility for natural resources; however, it does not explicitly define which mandate they have, nor is it connected to any particular responsibility to maintain law and order in that sector.
42 We would like to thank Maria Stern for inspiration in this section. Maria Stern, *Naming in security – construction identity: Mayan women in Guatemala on the eve of peace* (Mancheston: Manchester University Press, 2004).

expected to take controversial political positions or to act independently and publicly, which would challenge the codification of how an 'ideal woman' should behave.[43] This has particularly been true in situations involving physical violence or the threat thereof, which in one way or the other has been the case in Cambodia for the last few decades. As expressed by a Cambodian woman activist and politician, 'The customs and tradition of the nation oppress women.... Girls are not allowed to go to school; they are taught from a young age that they should not venture far from home and that they should stay in the home with their mother, in the kitchen, helping to look after children. So the culture does not help women have the confidence to go into politics.' Consequently, as political agents, the role of women has historically been limited.[44]

However, in the midst of Cambodia's patriarchy there are recurring images of female leadership, ranging from myths of origin to the use of the term '*mee khum*' (mother of the commune) to refer to commune chiefs. Within Khmer studies, this issue has to a large extent been framed within a debate as to whether Khmer society is predominantly 'matrilineal', indicating the possibility of an ancient matriarchy and in turn suggesting that 'authentic' Khmer society was (and should thus once more become) female dominated. In the pre-Angkorean era, Bion Griffin states, 'the Khmer were organized matrilineally with male accession to mother's sister ...'; this claim follows a 'tradition' of French scholarship arguing that Cambodia is essentially a matrilineal society. Such a perception is also widespread in contemporary Cambodian intellectual circles.[45]

However, this ascribed matriliny seems to crumble under current ethnographic scholarship suggesting that Cambodia is in fact a bilateral social system and was certainly never a matriarchy.[46] The explanation for the confusion may be the over-emphasis on certain sub-groups which historically followed matrilineal practices; alternatively and more interestingly, the societal ideal may have been matriliny, while practices remained generally bilateral. The idea of an ancient Khmer matriarchy may be a recurring construction of a contemporary patriarchy serving to elevate women, while at the same time mythologizing the issue. Judy Ledgerwood lists some traits of more concrete female influence over social life, while arguing that this influence rarely spills over into explicit political power.[47]

43 Judy Ledgerwood, 'Politics and gender: Negotiating conceptions of the ideal woman in present day Cambodia', *Asia-Pacific Viewpoint*, 37, 2 (1996): 142.
44 See Ledgerwood, 'Rural development' and Mona Lilja, *Power, resistance and women politicians in Cambodia: Discourses of emancipation* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2005). The quotation is from Laura McGrew, Kate Frieson and Sambath Chan, *Good governance from the ground up: Women's role in post-conflict Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Women Waging Peace, 2004), p. 26.
45 Bion Griffin, review of Michael Vickery's *Society, economics, and politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The 7th–8th centuries*, *Asian Perspectives*, 40, 1 (2002): 139–43. A broader discussion of the topic is in Judy Ledgerwood, 'Khmer kinship: The matriliny/matriarchy myth', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 51 (1995): 257–8.
46 May Ebihara, 'A Khmer village in Cambodia' (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1968); Judy Ledgerwood, *Analysis of the situation of women in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: UNICEF, 1992).
47 Ledgerwood, 'Khmer kinship'; on the alternative explanations she cites Kevin O'Sullivan, 'Concentric conformity in ancient Khmer Kinship organisation', *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica*, 13 (1962): 87–96.

The emerging image of the political role of women within the ongoing democratisation and decentralisation in Cambodia is marked by outside ambitions to shift the relative power positions between the sexes. There is no doubt that over the last ten years, women have become in a formal sense increasingly included in local political bodies, issues and processes, and that they now occupy more 'real' political positions than was previously the case. The explanation for this is twofold. Firstly, the arrival of the development community with its inherent norms and values has – though with varying degrees of success – promoted the inclusion of women in all representative organs. Increased female representation was achieved by requiring 40 per cent female membership on Village Development Committees, a pattern which spread during the mid-1990s, particularly within the CARERE/Seila project. Gender awareness has also been growing through discussion of the inequality issue in major policy documents. Most recently, this has been manifested in the pressure to include women on party candidate lists for commune elections. As a result of the 2002 election, the number of female Commune Councillors rose from virtually zero to 8.7 per cent. Some of the female Councillors we spoke to seemed to be satisfied with their role and proud of their work, feeling that they represented a new opportunity for women to be seen and heard at the commune level.[48] They also indicated that frequently women who otherwise would not have approached the commune authorities because of a fear of ridicule or worse, now dared to come forward when they needed to.

Secondly, and more importantly, the overall change in the political climate – from violence to stability, from authoritarianism to participation – allows women to assume leadership roles and to operate within the public sphere without necessarily challenging the prevailing political culture. In a post-conflict situation where 'development' is becoming more important than 'security', there may be more demand as well as space for female leaders.[49] Simply stated, commands on how to organise the local militia have been replaced by dialogue on measures for poverty reduction. Overall it could be argued that local politics has changed nature and become increasingly 'feminised'.

In a minor survey conducted in rural areas in 1999, as many as 60 per cent of the respondents expected, and 90 per cent preferred, a greater number of female leaders in the future given the continued spreading of peace.[50] 'Female leadership qualities', seen as distinct from toughness and ruthlessness, are readily and publicly acknowledged and viewed as desirable. A good leader, the same survey revealed, is empathetic, caring, strong and disciplinary – a response which presumably combines female and male stereotypes on the part of the respondents. Similar results were displayed in a more recent survey, emphasising for instance that women are superior in communicating, better at acting with the community's best interests in mind and more creative in conflict resolution. Moreover, although women are not typically associated with the public political arena, it does not mean that they are seen as generally 'weak' in rural society.[51] Hence, the political

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48 McGrew *et al.*, *Good governance*; the increase in female Councillors is from Mansfield and MacLeod, *Commune Council*.
49 McGrew *et al.*, *Good governance*.
50 Öjendal, 'Decentralisation as political commodity', based on Eastmond and Öjendal, *Role of the commune*.
51 Rusten *et al.*, *Challenges*; the survey results are in McGrew *et al.*, *Good governance*, p. 28.

opening ingrained in democratic decentralisation, in combination with a feminisation of local politics and the opening of dormant space for women to act, may make the political arena increasingly accessible to them.

However, as could be expected, the progress of female influence in politics looks considerably more limited when viewed with a slightly more critical eye. Firstly, the quantitative improvement just mentioned is small and probably – in real terms – less than what the statistics tell us. 'She quit, she had to take care of her family', or 'no, she is not here, she lives far away and could not come' were frequent replies when we asked if there were female Council members, or where they were when they did not appear at the meeting (although all the men tended to appear). The social pressure to attend to 'family business first' is considerable for women, seriously limiting their ability to take part in political meetings. Moreover, as has occurred in many other places, the 'risk' involved in being politically active is considerably higher for women, since relatively minor mistakes will cause major damage in terms of their reputation and esteem.

More importantly, women may have been given increased space but not necessarily increased clout, and patriarchally based reduction of female influence is still very much alive.

> I always try to raise my opinion during the meetings, but it seems as if I am just [a] minority. Other male CCs still think that women are not capable, and women are not given full priority yet. [For] every ten words I say, they listen only to three . . . I am just a paper figure. Because they put me [down], they never let me know about the detail[s] of the project[s].[52]

In all Commune Councils women are in the minority, implying that they have to deal not only with a male-dominated culture but also with predominantly male Councils. There are few or no effective mechanisms for breaking out of this underdog position, and as one study has pointed out, there are slim chances of achieving a level playing field in politics as long as society is 'sex-segregated in almost every aspect of its social relations'.[53] In addition, issues like family duties and social discourses on women's roles are also working against their attempts to exercise political influence. The woman just quoted went on to say:

> The most difficult problem. . . is the standard of living. I get only 70,000 *riel* [approximately 18 USD] a month for salary. Just to spend [money] for transport to come to meetings four times a month, it [is] almost finished already. I had to stop my teenage daughter from going to school, because there is no one doing the housework and keep the house running when I come to work at [the] Commune Council . . . . I will never stand for [election to the] Commune Council again.[54]

Interestingly, when a commune chief was pressed regarding the unequal conditions for men and women in the Councils, as well as how the small number of women could be justified, he was not opposed to or unfamiliar with the perspective as such, but laughingly

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52 Interview, female councillor, Kratie province, Sept. 2003.
53 Ibid., p. 26; see also Lilja, *Power, resistance*.
54 Interview, female councillor, Kratie province, Sept. 2003.

said that 'this will be an issue the new generation has to deal with'. This response says two things: firstly, he was well aware of the awkward situation and the pressure for change exerted from outside; and secondly, substantial change in terms of more equal gender relations in political bodies will not appear from his office any time soon, in spite of other changes of a fairly radical nature.

To some extent the formal inclusion of women in politics is *pro forma*, a 'body count' change (and hardly even that) which does not impact the core division of political power in rural areas, or even mere rhetoric. The 'gender coding' is hardly an explicit process but, as we saw above, is embedded in the grammar of everyday life. This issue goes to the very core of cultural identity, and will not change quickly as a result of decentralisation. In addition, it is also strongly related to the overall socio-economic situation of rural households in general. As long as poverty is widespread, re-negotiation of space for political work will be slow. Moreover, decentralisation is good for opening up space for processes in the making, but less so for pursuing policies which meet with local resistance. The risk of 'elite capture' inherent in decentralisation processes (whereby local elites take over) applies equally to gender issues, taking the form of 'male capture'. The difference would be that 'elite capture' is readily identified and as a value is uniformly deemed undesirable by policymakers, whereas 'male capture' would not normally even be 'discovered', let alone acted upon.

Finally, the source of the change that is actually taking place in terms of altered gender relations is to be found in the overall context. It is to a large extent made possible through the spreading of peace – a 'de-masculinisation' of local politics – and the diffusion of norms emanating from the development industry. Having said that, democratic decentralisation can be seen as opening up an arena where political power can actually be competed for – although on unequal terms and with structural limitations – and serves as an instrument to destabilise dominant discourses on gender roles.

Conclusions

Without a doubt, researchers have a lot of catching up to do in order to understand the socio-political dynamic of rural areas in Cambodia. Routine references to top-down, traditional authoritarianism or mono-structural patronage relations as an all-explanatory device are no longer adequate, nor are casual references to Cambodia as an ancient, unchanging, unchangeable, conservative society. Simultaneously, however, certain features of the political culture have by no means vanished; instead, they interact with evolving political and institutional development in multifarious patterns. In our study, institutional change is obvious and socio-political hybridisation evident: participatory democracy is pursued, but overlaps with remaining patronage structures, explicit and implicit semi-authoritarianism and the exercise of patriarchal power exercise – at times interacting, at others blending and sometimes competing. Much change is elicited by democratic decentralisation, but these processes are also entangled in a complex web, fed (and at times restrained) by mechanisms of patronage and power.

Obviously, there is a discursive change in terms of the perception of local authorities, and indeed of local politics. While this may be more clearly expressed by local officials, popular new images also emerge (or rather old images placed in a new context) which catch the nature of what is perceived as a new form of local politics. Interestingly, the political terminology is Khmerified and applied. Less surprising, but still challenging

the mainstream perception of Khmer political culture, the attitudes of civil servants are distinctly different, and seemingly triggered not by coercion but by inspiration. Most Commune Councillors we have talked to actually expressed relief over the change, sighing over the difficult years that now have passed (which does not necessarily mean that they have given up the benefits to which their political positions give them access). No doubt, the 'new local politics' will also allow for abuse of power. However, the potential abuse will be different in nature compared to the more authoritarian era.

Civil society, understood here in terms of NGO activity and spontaneous local associations, is enjoying an unprecedented level of activity. However, despite conventional wisdom on the *modus operandi* of NGOs, their activities in this context are more like private enterprises run by various groups of the local elite rather than mass-based citizen interest organisations emanating from below – hence their societal depth, engagement and representation can be questioned. There are, however, the seeds of an organised, possibly benign, challenge to state authorities emanating from some of these NGOs. Finally, women are seeking a more active political role and are supposedly becoming increasingly involved in local politics, assuming new positions, but they fight a male structural resistance that is not easily broken down (or even identified). Here we detected few indications of any structural change, even though there is no lack of female agency. In a broader sense, though, local politics is turning less 'masculine'.

In all areas conditions are changing: language, attitudes, practices and (to some extent) gender representation. The political culture, as reflected in the literature (discussed in the introduction), is challenged by these changes. The decentralisation reform (and liberalisation in general) has sparked agency, and the structural impediments to individual actions are less totalitarian and less punishing. Rural society is becoming more plural, more complex and more open, and at the same time less predictable, less docile and less easily subdued. However, while this change may be interpreted as positive, it may equally well open new avenues for exploitation and repression, although with other means and through other mechanisms. Political affairs are not explicitly dictated by the centre or by the commune chief in isolation. It is local elite groups – whether party-, patronage-, military-, kinship- or economically-based – that compete for the wider political space. Rules and arenas for this competition are different from what they used to be, and there are new and more different actors present. Khmer political culture is no longer holding still for its portrait.