

Political subjectivity in Cambodia

Political subjectivation is the process during which an individual goes from being an object of politics to a political subject with his or her own particular orientations toward the sources and foci of power. Cambodian political life provides the perfect lens through which to examine this process, because the dense network of patronage that connects the political and economic elite of Cambodia with the masses offers sharp examples of how political subjects may be formed.

Alvin Cheng-Hin Lim



Subjectivation

Political theorists have long sought to explain subjectivation. I draw on the theory of subjectivation provided by Jacques Rancière, because I find that his account of the engagement of power with the world of experience offers a rich and compelling explanation of how individuals are awakened into political consciousness, and how political subjects orientate themselves in relation to the dominant power structures in society.¹ In Rancière's theory the policing function of the polity goes beyond what we normally understand as the provision of security and serves to enforce what he describes as the "distribution of the sensible", that is, "the general laws distributing lines of sight, forms of speech, and estimations of a body's capacity".² In other words, the police control the phenomenal life of the polity ensuring that its individual members adhere to the norms of speech and behavior, which in turn govern what can be seen, heard and experienced in the community. As he elaborates, the distribution of the sensible that is established by the police is "an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise".³ This establishes "a single direction for the movement of society".⁴

The Cambodian government's restriction of media coverage of the massive funeral procession, in July 2016, for the murdered government critic Kem Ley is a good example of an attempt to police the distribution of the sensible. Kem Ley, a social activist and founder of the Grassroots Democracy Party, had a large following on social media, and just prior to his assassination had participated in interviews with the local media and the watchdog NGO Global Witness' report *Hostile Takeover*,⁵ which revealed the extensive business interests of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's family. The thousands of ordinary Cambodians who chose to pay their respects at Kem Ley's wake and to march in his funeral procession, despite the disapproval of the government, illustrate the next step in Rancière's account of subjectivation: when dissensus breaks the consensus forged by the police function of the polity. As Joseph Tanke explains:

Dissensus fragments the community by making visible what previously went unseen. It operates, first and foremost, on the aesthetics of the community, those implicit decisions about who is included and in what way, as well as those judgments about what counts as voice or noise.⁶

Through their participation in the funeral proceedings, of which the government's escalating threats eventually led some of the funeral committee members to leave Cambodia, the Cambodian participants hence achieved a redistribution of the sensible, making visible what the government had wanted to keep invisible. If they had not already been political subjects their involvement in this act of dissensus served as their subjectivation, transforming them from objects into subjects of politics.

Consensus and dissensus

The mass participation in Kem Ley's funeral proceedings remains an exceptional event of dissensus, however. The consensus that protects the distribution of the sensible in Cambodia continues to be protected by the dense network of patron-client relations in Cambodian

society. As Simon Springer points out, the adoption of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s following the adoption of the Paris Peace Accords saw the ruling regime coopting neoliberalism for the benefit of their patronage networks, in particular through their "ability to influence the monetary channels of investment and privatization in ways that only those embedded within their systems of patronage can receive any direct benefit".⁷ Indeed, the troublesome Global Witness report highlighted by Kem Ley just before his murder exposed Prime Minister Hun Sen and his family's position at the apex of a vast patronage network that has extended its extractive reach across the Cambodian economy. The advantageous position of Cambodia's elite has been further sealed by the "decades of nepotism and carefully arranged marriages among families of the ruling elites", which have "created a web of alliances which many fear, if dismantled, would bring down with it the whole structure of the state".⁸

Given the deep influence of this patronage network in Cambodia's political economy, an attractive option for subjectivation is the decision to join the policed consensus, because alignment with the distribution of the sensible allows the individual to emerge as a political subject with audibility and visibility to the ruling regime, which is a necessary condition for him/her to begin expressing demands *qua* client of his/her patron.⁹ This can be seen in the case of Chhay Thy, an official with the human rights NGO ADHOC and government critic who in January 2017 suddenly joined the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) to run for the position of commune chief. As he explained, this move from a position of powerlessness into a position of power would allow him to deliver substantive goods to his community: "I do it to become the commune chief so that the local community will develop, because when working with an NGO, I have no decision-making authority in developing [communities]".¹⁰ As Chhay Thy understood, loyalty to a patron can reap advantages to a hardworking client. The *oknha*, Cambodia's business elite, are good examples of this reciprocal relationship. In exchange for financing the ruling elite's rural patronage projects, including "pagodas, hospitals, roads, bridges, and so-called Hun Sen schools", the *oknha* enjoy "preferential treatment in the form of land concessions, monopolies, and other perquisites".¹¹ Clients with far less means may serve their patrons in other ways. In October 2015, three officers from Hun Sen's bodyguard unit brutally attacked the opposition lawmakers Nhay Chamroeun and Kong Saphea, dragging them from their cars, beating them, and leaving them with "broken bones and teeth and a ruptured eardrum".¹² Despite being sentenced to four years in jail they were suddenly released in November 2016 after serving less than a year of their sentence. Hun Sen would subsequently promote two of them, Mao Hoeun and Suth Vanny, to the rank of colonel in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, and the third, Chay Sarith, to the rank of brigadier-general.

The part of no part

In Rancière's theory one key source of political change comes from *la part des sans-part* [the part of no part], as in those who have been excluded from society. Political change comes when the part of no part forces a redistribution of the sensible, making themselves visible and audible where before they had been ignored, and asserting their claim to the benefits of social life.¹³

In Cambodia the ethnic Vietnamese minority counts as the part of no part given their exclusion from citizenship under the Cambodian Constitution. This prevents them from accessing the social benefits and services enjoyed by citizens.¹⁴ During the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, following the end of the Khmer Rouge's genocidal revolution, the ethnic Vietnamese minority failed to push for their right to Cambodian citizenship, and today, despite their long residency, they retain the status of illegal aliens. Their situation following the withdrawal of the Vietnamese occupation army quickly deteriorated, and the Cambodian government has even lost its tolerance for their precarious existence in their floating villages on the Tonlé Sap.¹⁵

Rather than being the locus around which the Cambodian people have pushed for political change, the ethnic Vietnamese minority has instead functioned as a scapegoat for xenophobic Cambodian politicians to propagate anti-Vietnamese paranoia, including narratives of the Vietnamese theft of Cambodian land. Indeed, some Cambodian opposition leaders have attracted popular support by highlighting Prime Minister Hun Sen and the CPP's long association with the Vietnamese Communist Party, under whose tutelage during the Vietnamese occupation they ascended to power. Anti-Vietnamese sentiment hence continues to have cultural and political salience in Cambodia today, and the CPP has responded by bowing to public sentiment and cracking down on the ethnic Vietnamese minority. While the long-standing hatred of Vietnam has rallied together Cambodians from across the political spectrum, the consequences for the ethnic Vietnamese minority have been arrests, deportations, and the scuttling of their floating villages.¹⁶ Future political change will thus have to come from some other source, perhaps the demographic changes arising from Cambodia's ongoing encounter with global flows of investment and trade.

Alvin Cheng-Hin Lim is a research fellow with International Public Policy Pte. Ltd., and is the author of *Cambodia and the Politics of Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2013). He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and has taught at Pannasastra University of Cambodia and the American University of Nigeria (alvinlim@ippreview.com).

References

- Lim, A.C.H. 2013. *Cambodia and the Politics of Aesthetics*. New York: Routledge, pp.4-5.
- Tanke, J.J. 2011. *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*. London: Continuum, p.45.
- Rancière, J. 1999. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.29.
- Ibid., Tanke, J.J., pp.45-46.
- Global Witness. 2016. *Hostile Takeover: The Corporate Empire of Cambodia's Ruling Family*, 7 July 2016. (tinyurl.com/hostak; accessed 5 June 2017).
- Ibid., Tanke, J.J., p.62.
- Springer, S. 2017. 'Klepto-Neoliberalism: Authoritarianism and Patronage in Cambodia', in Cemal Burak Tansel (ed.) *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, p.239.
- Slocomb, M. 2006. 'The Nature and Role of Ideology in the Modern Cambodian State', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37:390. (doi.org/10.1017/S0022463406000695; accessed 5 June 2017).
- Rancière, J. 2011. *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose. Malden: Polity Press, p.4.
- Phak Seangly. 2017. 'Adhoc official goes CPP', *Phnom Penh Post*, 4 January 2017. (tinyurl.com/adgoccp; accessed 5 June 2017).
- Verver, M. & Dahles, H. 2015. 'The Institutionalisation of Oknha: Cambodian Entrepreneurship at the Interface of Business and Politics', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 45:62. (doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2014.891147; accessed 5 June 2017).
- Khuon Narim. "'Do Not Ask', Official Says of Promoted Bodyguards", *Cambodia Daily*, 29 December 2016. (tinyurl.com/promguards; accessed 5 June 2017).
- Ibid., Tanke, J.J., p.43.
- Alvin Cheng-Hin Lim. 2017. 'Ethnic Identities in Cambodia', in K. Brickell & S. Springer (eds.) *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*. New York: Routledge, pp.363-364.
- Alvin Cheng-Hin Lim. 2015. 'Human Rights in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge', *Review of Human Rights* 1:15-17. (reviewhumanrights.com/khmer-rouge; accessed 5 June 2017).
- Chin Sopheak. 2016. 'Floating Villages on Cambodia's Tonle Sap Are Being Scuttled', *Radio Free Asia*, 1 September 2016. (tinyurl.com/rfascuttle; accessed 5 June 2017).

Above: The funeral procession of Kem Ley, who was murdered in 2013, makes its way through Takeo province. Photo by Heng Chivoan/The Phnom Penh Post.