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**The Future of Autocracies in South East Asia:  
Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos**

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## **The Future of Autocracies in South East Asia: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos**

*Martin Gainsborough*

### **Abstract**

Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are often grouped together for the purposes of analysis. There are some obvious reasons for this. The fact that they are former French colonies situated in mainland South East Asia is one reason (i.e. 'French Indochina'). That they all saw communist parties rise to nationwide power in the mid-1970s is another. However, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are also independent sovereign states. They have different histories. Their pre-colonial influences are different. They experienced French colonial rule differently while the character of the post-colonial state in each country is different too, often in quite subtle ways. In the post-Cold War period, the trajectory these three states have taken is not the same either. Furthermore, as the three states have integrated more comprehensively into the regional and global economy, the fact of their different size and regional location means that they are being buffeted differently by external economic, political and cultural forces. It is against this backdrop that the paper proceeds, focusing on the three countries' political evolution in the post-Cold War period.

## The Future of Autocracies in South East Asia: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos

### Introduction

Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are often grouped together for the purposes of analysis. There are some obvious reasons for this. The fact that they are former French colonies situated in mainland South East Asia is one reason (i.e. 'French Indochina'). That they all saw communist parties rise to nationwide power in the mid-1970s is another. Also relevant is Vietnam's ill-fated attempt during the Cold War to sustain a 'special relationship' across Indochina, incorporating Cambodia and Laos in a kind of tutelage role.<sup>1</sup> In the post-Cold war period, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have been grouped together because they are among South East Asia's poorest states; because they are linked through what is known as the Greater Mekong Sub-region; and because they are among the newest members of South East Asia's regional association, ASEAN.<sup>2</sup> That all three states are viewed as undergoing a process of 'reform' involving a transition away from a centrally planned economy also helps explain why they are grouped together.

However, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are also independent sovereign states. They have different histories. Their pre-colonial influences are different. They experienced French colonial rule differently while the character of the post-colonial state in each country is different too, often in quite subtle ways.<sup>3</sup> In the post-Cold

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978 and had a military presence in Laos until the late 1980s. For background, see Grant Evans and Kelvin Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon*, London and New York: Verso, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> On the Greater Mekong Sub-region, see Alfred Oehlers, 'A Critique of ADB Policies Towards the Greater Mekong Sub-region,' *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vo. 36, no. 4, pp. 464-478. On ASEAN, see Mya Than and Carolyn L. Gates (eds.), *ASEAN Enlargement: Impacts and Implications*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> On the pre-colonial influences, see Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ching Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971; Robert S. Newman, *Brahmin and Mandarin: A Comparison of the Cambodian and Vietnamese Revolutions*, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Working Papers, Clayton, Australia: Monash University, 1978. On different experience of French colonial rule, see Anthony Barnett, 'Cambodia Will Never Disappear,' *New Left Review* 180, March/April 1990, pp. 101-125; Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887-1954*, Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1995. On the different character of the state, see Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos since 1975*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1988; Martin Gainsborough, *Vietnam:*

War period, the trajectory these three states have taken is not the same either. Vietnam and Laos, for instance, are still one-party Communist states but Cambodia has transitioned away from this – at least formally – seeing the formation of opposition parties, and holding multiparty elections more or less regularly, since 1993. Furthermore, as the three states have integrated more comprehensively into the regional and global economy, the fact of their different size and regional location means that they are being buffeted differently by external economic, political and cultural forces. In general, landlocked Laos, which is the smallest of the three countries, seems most vulnerable to external influences although the other two are by no means immune.<sup>4</sup> All of this is to say that while Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos do have significant things in common, which makes it worthwhile comparing them, their current trajectories are not identical, nor should we expect them to be so in the future. It is against this backdrop that the paper proceeds, focusing on the three countries' political evolution in the post-Cold War period.

The paper has four sections following this introduction. In the first section, the paper offers a conceptualisation of 'reform' somewhat different from the orthodox one which seeks to strike a balance between continuity and change, and between formal policy initiatives and informal practices. The paper then looks at the steps taken by the ruling parties in each country either to liberalise or restrict the liberalisation of the political system, covering the period from the mid-1980s to the present. Where appropriate we highlight similarities and differences between the three countries in question. In the third section, the paper drills down more deeply to try and capture the balance between continuity and change – and their drivers – in a more nuanced manner. To do this, we look at political culture, money politics, and civil society, three areas which we argue are important if we are to make sense of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos' politics. In the fourth section of the paper we conclude, considering the implications of our analysis for how politics might evolve in the future in the three states in question.

The paper's argument is that regardless of formal political system and despite extensive exposure to international governance reforms since the 1990s, all three states present considerable obstacles to liberal politics. In terms of causality, we see this as deriving from two key features, both of which are of *longue duree* in terms of

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*Rethinking the State*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2010; Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> For background on Laos on this point see Soren Ivarsson, Thommy Stevnsson and Stein Tonnesson, *The Quest for Balance in a Changing Laos: A Political Analysis*, NIAS Reports, No. 25, Copenhagen: Nordic Institute for Asian Studies.

their historical origins. These two features are an unreformed elite political culture and the close connection which exists in people's minds between holding public office and private gain. Together, these have combined to circumvent liberal reforms. On the other hand, the paper notes increased levels of spontaneous protest and new forms of civil society organisation in all three countries – albeit sometimes at high personal cost. While we do not believe such activity will lead to the emergence of liberal politics any time soon, it nevertheless illustrates how (at one level) politics in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos is not static. The paper is based on a qualitative research methodology drawing on archival and field work conducted in all three countries over a number of years. Although not cited directly in this paper, key theoretical influences underpinning the paper include Barrington Moore, Dietrich Rueschemeyer et al, and writing which distances itself from the old transition approach.<sup>5</sup>

We now look at how best to conceptualise 'reform'.

### **Rethinking reform: beyond change and policy**

Whether it is Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos, all three countries have attracted a fairly standard orthodoxy in terms of the kind of transition they are supposed to be on in the post-Cold War era. At the centre of this orthodoxy is the notion of 'reform', embodying the idea that at a particular point in time, elites in these three countries made a series of conscious decisions, resulting in them embarking on a new 'reformist' path. For Vietnam and Laos, the key turning points are usually seen as being the Sixth National Communist Party Congress in Vietnam and the Fourth National Communist Party Congress in Laos, both of which occurred in 1986.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For writing which distances itself from the old transition approach, see Thomas Carothers, 'The End of the Transition Paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no.1, 2002, pp. 5-21; Daniel A. Bell and Kanishka Jayasuriya, 'Understanding Illiberal Democracy: A Framework' in Daniel A. Bell, David Brown, Kanishka Jayasuriya and David Martin Jones (eds.) *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1995, pp. 1-16; and Kanishka Jayasuriya and Garry Rodan, 'Beyond Hybrid Regimes: More Participation, Less Contestation in South East Asia,' *Democratization*, vol. 14, no.5, 2007, pp. 773-794. For an application of the work of Barrington Moore and Stephen Rueschemeyer et al to the case of Vietnam see Martin Gainsborough, 'Political Change in Vietnam: In Search of the Middle-Class Challenge to the State,' *Asian Survey*, vol.42, no. 5, 2002, pp. 694-707.

<sup>6</sup> Borje Ljunggren (ed.) *The Challenge of Reform in Indochina*, Harvard Institute for International Development, Harvard University Press, 1993.

In Vietnam, the Sixth Congress is seen as the birth place of *doi moi*, literally meaning ‘new change’ but usually translated as renovation, while in Laos the Fourth Congress is viewed as the launch of its ‘new economic mechanism’ based on its own ‘new thinking’ (*chin tanakan may*). In Cambodia’s case, similar decisions are generally viewed as having been made in 1989 following the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops.<sup>7</sup> Some accounts emphasise earlier and later turning points in terms of the direction the three countries have taken.<sup>8</sup> However, the key point is that at a particular period in time elites are viewed as having introduced substantive changes, resulting in all three countries embarking on a new path. This is the orthodox ‘reform’ position.

In terms of what elites are said to have done, accounts vary somewhat but the general consensus is that in each case the changes made were both economic and political in nature, even if there is sometimes debate about the balance between the different components. We will unpack the political dimensions to reform in the paper’s next section. The question we wish to address here is what is wrong with this standard account. To do this, we highlight three key assumptions in the standard account, which we think are problematic and lead to a partial account.

As an increasing number of scholars now recognise, the standard orthodoxy is distorting for three key reasons. Firstly, it runs the risk of placing too much emphasis on change. Secondly, it places too much emphasis on policy (i.e. policy change), and thirdly, it places too much emphasis on elite initiative. What results from this is a limited account of reform in two crucial respects: firstly, the standard account downplays areas of continuity in both economics and politics during the ‘reform’ years; and secondly it underestimates the extent to which factors *other than* elite-led policy initiatives have affected the direction Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are travelling.<sup>9</sup> Relevant here is the extent to which elites in all three countries have often reacted *after the event*, moving to formalise spontaneous, ‘bottom-up’ initiatives, or experimentation, whether by officials, traders or enterprise directors, city dwellers or farmers. Generally speaking, elites prefer not to acknowledge such activity because it conflicts with the notion that they are the architects of ‘reform’ and that they are in control. However, as has been said of the orthodox reform account in relation to China, any account which neglects the role of informal or unsanctioned initiatives in influencing the direction these countries have taken is a “highly

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> On Vietnam, see Adam Fforde and Stefan de Vylder, *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam*, Boulder, CO., Westview Press, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> For a book length exploration of these ideas in relation to Vietnam, see Gainsborough, *Rethinking the State*.

sanitised” one, which “distracts us from the real dynamics of the reform process in favour of an oversimplified morality tale”.<sup>10</sup> So, to be clear, a holistic conceptualisation of reform needs to try and strike a balance between formal policy initiatives and informal activity on the one hand, and between continuity and change on the other hand. Moreover, this is just as important when looking at political change as it is for looking at reforms to the economy.

With this in mind, we now turn to the next section of the paper, looking at the steps taken by the ruling parties in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos either to liberalise or restrict the liberalisation of the political system from the mid-1980s. Later, we will seek to tease out some of the more informal processes which have influenced the direction these three countries have taken, and which are crucial to understanding the nature of their politics.

### **Formal political reforms – extent and limits**

Surveying Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in comparative perspective and considering formal steps taken by the countries’ ruling elites in respect of the political system since the 1980s, one can see points of both similarity and difference. Vietnam and Laos, which have enjoyed close fraternal relations dating back to the early days of their revolutionary struggles and still regularly consult each other, have much in common in terms of the steps they have taken to reform their political systems. Cambodia’s trajectory is somewhat different. However, looking at Cambodia’s political evolution over the course of the 1990s to the present what is striking is that despite it formally being a constitutional monarchy and a representative democracy, Cambodia’s politics has ended up with more rather than less in common with Vietnam and Laos than one might have anticipated. To explore this, we will look at Vietnam and Laos first and Cambodia second.

#### *Vietnam and Laos*

To get a handle on the formal steps taken by the Communist Parties of Vietnam and Laos to liberalise or restrict the liberalisation of their political systems, three areas are important: first, the logic of the reforms set in train at the Sixth and Fourth Party Congresses in 1986; second, moves against political pluralism upheld by both parties in the early 1990s; and third, their engagement with the international donor aid

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<sup>10</sup> Barry Naughton, *Growing out of the Plan: Chinese Economic Reform 1978-93*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 22.

community.

### *Post-1986 political reforms*

While the reforms set in train at the Sixth Party Congress in Vietnam and Fourth Party Congress in Laos in 1986 are often seen as being primarily about economic change in both cases they had a clear political component. In Vietnam, for instance, the key policy document associated with the Party Congress, namely the Political Report, highlighted a series of problem areas, including poor coordination between different elements of the Party and government, a tendency by Party officials to operate outside the law, and for Party officials to ride roughshod over electoral procedures.<sup>11</sup> It is this critique – set out at the Sixth Congress – which set in train formal moves by the Party to build a state ‘ruled by law’, to strengthen the role of the country’s parliament, the National Assembly, and to clarify the relationship between the Party, the government, and its citizens. These issues all remain current to this day even if how exactly the Party views ‘rule of law’, or the ‘correct’ relationship between the state and its citizens, are open questions. We will return to these issues later.

Laos’ Fourth Congress set in train a similar set of reforms to Vietnam, including the drafting of the country’s first constitution, which was eventually passed in 1991, along with an equivalent emphasis on strengthening the bureaucracy and the rule of law.<sup>12</sup> In both countries, there was also a loosening up in relation to the social sphere – what some have referred to as a ‘destalinisation of everyday life’.<sup>13</sup> This manifested itself in an easing of restrictions on travel (both domestic and foreign), less day-to-day surveillance, and a proliferation of new media outlets, informal associations and other groups, including religious groups.<sup>14</sup> Granted that Party and security force control did not disappear completely, and sometimes there were clampdowns, but there was a noticeable loosening up, such that in both countries the atmosphere changed considerably.

### *The rejection of political pluralism*

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<sup>11</sup> See Carlyle A. Thayer, ‘Political Reform in Vietnam: Doi Moi and the Emergence of Civil Society,’ in Robert F. Miller (ed.) *The Development of Civil Society in Communist Systems*. Allend and Unwin, 1992, pp. 113-114.

<sup>12</sup> Ivarsson, *Quest for Balance*, pp. 34-42.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase has certainly been used by Adam Fforde and may originate with him.

<sup>14</sup> On Vietnam, see Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, Russell H.K. Heng and David W.H. Koh (eds.), *Getting Organised in Vietnam: Moving In and Around the Socialist State*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Communist bloc was shaken by the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and also by popular protests in Tiananmen Square in China. This inevitably led to debate in Vietnam and Laos – and speculation externally – as to the future of their political systems. Much of this occurred behind close doors so it is hard to know exactly what was said. However, in 1990-91, both Vietnam and Laos moved to silence what appeared to be minority voices pushing for political pluralism. In Laos, this saw the arrest and subsequent imprisonment of two former vice-ministers, Thongsouk Saisangkhi, Latsami Khamphoui, and a justice ministry official, Feng Sakchittaphong for allegedly plotting to overthrow the regime.<sup>15</sup> In Vietnam, Politburo member Tran Xuan Bach was sacked prior to the Seventh National Party Congress in 1991 apparently because he advocated multiparty politics.<sup>16</sup> Both ruling parties later issued statements decisively turning their face against what they called “extreme liberal demands” (Vietnam) and “a multi-party system” (Laos).<sup>17</sup> This has remained their position ever since. That said, both parties continue to talk about developing democracy. However, this is not liberal democracy: instead they means things like widening the franchise for top Party positions, increasing the number of local officials elected directly by the people, and ensuring that the ruling Party listen carefully to the government, the parliament, and citizens.<sup>18</sup>

### *Engaging with the international donor community*

Since the early 1990s, Vietnam and Laos have both opened their doors to a wide range of bilateral and multilateral donor organisations and international non-government organisations, receiving high levels of aid and technical assistance in the process. This includes both Asian and Western donors. In terms of Asian donors, this has seen a heavy Vietnamese, Thai and Chinese influence in Laos, and a carefully managed Chinese presence in Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> In terms of Western donors, this has seen

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<sup>15</sup> Ivarsson, *Quest for Balance*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>16</sup> Brantley Womack, ‘Vietnam in 1996: Reform Immobilism,’ *Asian Survey*, vo. 37, no. 1, 1997, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> See Communist Party of Vietnam, *Seventh National Congress: Documents*, Vietnam Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991, p. 104, and Ivarsson, *Quest for Balance*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>18</sup> VietnamNet Bridge, ‘Entrust heavy responsibilities to innovators,’ former NA Chairman urges. August 20, 2009. <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/interviews/2009/08/864361/> (Last accessed May 9, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> On the influence of China and Vietnam on Laos, see Brian McCartan ‘China and Vietnam square off in Laos,’ *Asia Times Online*, August 30, 2008. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/JH30Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/JH30Ae01.html) (Last accessed July 19, 2011). On Laos’ attempts to balance the influence of all donors see Ivarsson, *Quest for Balance*, pp. 20-33. On Vietnam-China relations see Brantley Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

both governments working with donors in a wide range of ‘governance’ related areas, such as public administration reform, anti-corruption, legal and judicial reform, and civil society development.<sup>20</sup> Whether this has had much impact on the character of the two countries politics is doubtful. However, we will return to this later in the paper.

### *Cambodia*

Compared to Laos and Vietnam, the trajectory of political change has been somewhat different in Cambodia. The signing of the Paris peace accords in 1991 between the Vietnam-backed regime in Cambodia led by Hun Sen and the coalition government in exile, incorporating the royalist party, FUNCINPEC, and the Khmer Rouge, resulted in a major UN operation in the country, and in 1993 the holding of multi-party elections contested by 19 political parties. In the short-term, the UN operation in Cambodia had far-reaching effects, leading to the establishment of a liberal political framework, including a liberal constitution, a surge in civil society activity, and the emergence of a more diversified and outspoken media.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, this apparent flowering of ‘liberal’ politics has not lasted, and although regular elections have continued to be held, the pattern has been one of a steady reversal of the gains made in the early 1990s as Prime Minister Hun Sen and the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) has systematically strengthened its grip on power.<sup>22</sup> The result has been the wholesale emasculation of the political opposition, including one-time coalition partner, FUNCINPEC, and the Sam Rainsy Party. Government critics in the media, trade unions, and wider civil society have also frequently been silenced. This has occurred through a mixture of intimidation, violence, distribution of patronage, changes to electoral law, and recourse to the courts, which are not political independent.<sup>23</sup>

The results have been far-reaching. In the 2008 election, the CPP captured 90 out of 123 seats and for the first time since 1993 was able to form a government on its own. The CPP also controls 90% of all commune or local government committees.<sup>24</sup> This

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<sup>20</sup> See World Bank, *Vietnam Development Report 2010: Modern Institutions*. Joint Donor Report to the Vietnam Consultative Group Meeting, Hanoi, December 3-4, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> David W. Roberts, *Political Transition in Cambodia 1991-99: Power, Elitism and Democracy*, Curzon Press, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Caroline Hughes, *The Political Economy of the Cambodian Transition 1991-2001*, Routledge, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> David Chandler, ‘Cambodia in 2009: Plus C’est la Meme Chose,’ *Asian Survey*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2010, p. 229.

is a remarkable transformation for a party which came second to FUNCINPEC in the election in 1993. Moreover, politics in Cambodia is much more violent than in either Vietnam or Laos. In the latter, politically motivated killings are very rare indeed whereas this is not the case in Cambodia.<sup>25</sup>

Like Vietnam and Laos, the Cambodian government has permitted the international donor community to operate, working with them on a wide range of governance reforms since the 1990s. Again, donors include both Western and Asian donors with China and Vietnam predominant in terms of the latter. However, as with Vietnam and Laos the question of what impact engaging with external donors is having on the direction of the country is taking is much debated.

To probe this and other issues, we now turn to the next section of the paper. Here, the aim is to dig deeper in terms of the balance between continuity and change as we further assess the three countries' politics. We are also interested in being clearer about the drivers of the outcomes we observe. This relates to our argument that the erosion of liberal gains in Cambodia and the failure for them to take root in Vietnam and Laos can be seen to be linked to two key factors: firstly, the existence of a conservative 'non-liberal' elite political culture in all three countries (which despite some differences is remarkably similar across the three cases); and secondly, the close connection which exists in people's minds between holding public office and private gain. Both, we argue, have worked to prevent the bedding down of liberal reforms either because they are not in reality on the agenda, or because, to the extent they are, they have been subverted. This is what, the paper argues, has happened with the international governance reforms despite the fact that elites in all three countries have nominally signed up to them.<sup>26</sup>

In the section which follows, we explore these issues, highlighting both the nature of the two causal factors we have identified and how they work to produce the outcomes they do. Then, because it is not simply a case of political continuity in any of the three states we are looking at, we look at the emergence of spontaneous protest and nascent civil society.

### **Continuity and change – three lenses**

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<sup>25</sup> See Duncan McCargo, 'Cambodia,' in *An Analysis of Democratic Governance: Countries at the Crossroads 2010*, Freedom House, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010, pp. 81-102.

<sup>26</sup> For background, see Martin Gainsborough, 'Present but not Powerful: Neoliberalism, the State, and Development in Vietnam,' *Globalizations*, vol. 7, no. 4, December 2010, pp. 475-488.

### *Unreformed elite political culture*

As was noted at the beginning of the paper, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have different pre-colonial influences, they experienced French colonial rule differently, and consequently the character of the post-colonial state is not the same either. However, in terms of elite political culture, there are some striking similarities. Untangling the origins of these similarities is beyond the scope of this paper. However, what we are interested in is characterising these outlooks and documenting their effects.

At the heart of the political culture which still predominates in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos is a heavy dose of elitism and political paternalism. This has implications for what is viewed as the ‘correct’ relationship between the state and its citizens, or the rulers and the ruled. At root, and in stark contrast to the West, there is an implied strong belief that the goodwill and high moral capacity of those in authority rather than institutional checks and balances as favoured in the liberal tradition, will ensure that power is restrained.<sup>27</sup> The relevance of this cultural mindset can be seen in relation to the importance of family – or who your parents are – in all three countries. What a person’s parents have done is often as important as a person’s own achievements if they wish to get on. In Vietnam and Laos – although perhaps less in Cambodia where power is more personalised – this mindset is also evident in perennial discussions about whether political leaders need to be Communist Party members or whether talent or moral stature is more important.<sup>28</sup>

A focus on political culture is helpful in making sense of all three ruling parties’ rejection of political pluralism, and their deep unease with ‘civil society’ or indeed any form of organisation which operates outside of state or ruling party structures. In this respect, it is worth noting that regulations governing the operating of non-governmental organisations have advanced very slowly in all three states and/or have been highly controversial.<sup>29</sup>

A focus on political culture makes it easier too to understand the character of elections

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<sup>27</sup> Geir Helgesen and Li Xing, ‘Good Governance – Democracy and Minzhu,’ in Hans Antlov and Tak-Wing Ngo (eds.) *The Cultural Construction of Politics in Asia*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000, pp. 175-202 and Garry Rodan, ‘Singapore’s Leadership Transition: Erosion or Refinement of Authoritarian Rule?’ *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* vol. 24, no. 1, 1992, pp. 3-17.

<sup>28</sup> *Tuoi Tre*, April 17, 2006, *Thanh Nien*, April 24, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> See Carlyle A. Thayer, ‘Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society,’ *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2009, p. 7; Kristina Jonsson, ‘Laos in 2009: Recession and Southeast Asian Games,’ *Asian Survey*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2009, p. 241; Caroline Hughes, ‘Cambodia in 2007: Development and Dispossession,’ *Asian Survey*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2008, p. 74.

in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, in particular how they are more seen as an occasion when voters confirm the intrinsic merits of the leadership rather than a competitive contest between alternatives.<sup>30</sup> This makes sense not only of the ways in which the state seeks to control who is elected to parliament in Vietnam and Laos but also of how in Cambodia Hun Sen has instinctively moved to close down the notion of elections as a serious contest.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, an understanding of political culture in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos raises profound questions about what is going on when the ruling parties work with the international donor community in areas such as public administration reform or anti-corruption given the heavy emphasis in the governance agenda on liberal checks and balances, which as we have argued, these states are deeply ambivalent about. The argument of this paper is that elites are generally not serious about instituting liberal reforms or, as likely, simply conceive of the reforms in non-liberal ways. However, this issue is addressed further in the next section of the paper.

Finally, a focus on political culture makes it easier to understand (although not condone) the tendency to treat critics – particularly dissidents – harshly. Human rights derive from buying into this conservative political mindset. Failure to do so means you surrender your rights.<sup>32</sup>

#### *The commercialisation of the state and the rise of money politics*

The second major obstacle to liberal politics taking root in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos has to do with the commercialisation of the state and the rise of money politics in the period since formal reforms began. The orthodox reform position would tend – implicitly or explicitly – to associate reform with economic liberalisation and the retreat of the state. In the account favoured here, we associate the reform years in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos with state advance, as politicians, officials, and those with close connections to them, have taken advantage of the opportunities which have come with marketisation and re-engagement in the regional and global economy to engage in business and enrich themselves.

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Taylor (ed.) *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Hughes, *Political Economy*. On Vietnam see Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, 'Paint-by-Numbers Democracy: The Stakes, Structure, and Results of the 2007 Vietnamese National Assembly Election'. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol.4, no.1, 2009, pp. 1-48.

<sup>32</sup> Antlov, *Cultural Construction of Politics*.

In Vietnam, this process was first documented in detail in relation to the rise of new state business interests from the 1980s as those with political connections began to accumulate capital by engaging in market transactions even under central planning.<sup>33</sup> In Laos, the commercialisation of the state is evident in frequent references to the influence of politicians and their relatives among the rich-list or at the commanding heights of the Lao economy.<sup>34</sup> In Cambodia, the process began with the selling off of state assets, particularly by the CPP, in the late 1980s as Hun Sen sought to win friends and influence people in anticipation of the changed political climate.<sup>35</sup>

The characteristics of this 'reform' political economy are similar across Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. First, as has been suggested, political connections and relationships are key. These are necessary for political protection as well as to be able access land, capital and contracts, or to obtain or bypass the necessary permits. Conflicts of interests, as officials operate in sectors of the economy in which they also have regulatory oversight (often using the names of friends or relatives) are commonplace, as is leveraging off inside information gained by virtue of one's office to engage in profiteering or speculation. Land speculation – or land-grabbing in Cambodia – is ubiquitous in all three states, and has been a key way in which politicians and officials have got rich fast, notably as land started to become a tradable commodity again from the late 1980s.<sup>36</sup>

Central to this 'reform' political economy is also the close connection which exists in people's minds between holding public office and private gain. In Vietnam, this is summed up in a pithy phrase which asks whether one's position is 'just a seat' or 'whether it pays'. Moreover, in all three countries, public office comes with a price tag insofar as people are prepared to pay to obtain it. This makes no sense if one notes that official salaries are low. However, people calculate that they will be able to recoup their investment by doing business and extracting rents once they have secured a position.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Gainsborough, *Changing Political Economy of Vietnam: The Case of Ho Chi Minh City*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, 'Family Problems', *Inside Story*, January 19, 2011. <http://inside.org.au/family-problems/> (Last accessed July 19, 2011); Ivarsson, *Quest for Balance*, pp. 44-46.

<sup>35</sup> Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2003, especially pp. 316-335.

<sup>36</sup> Gainsborough, *Changing Political Economy*; Gottesman, *Cambodia*; Hughes, *Political Economy*; Stuart Fox, 'Family Problems'.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Gainsborough, Dang Ngoc Dinh, Tran Thanh Phuong, 'Corruption, Public Administration and Development: Challenges and Opportunities' in Jairo Acuna-Alfaro (ed.) *Reforming Public Administration Reform in Vietnam: Current Situation and Recommendations*. The National Political Publishing House, 2009, pp. 377-427; Gottesman, *Cambodia*, and Stuart-Fox, 'Family Problems'. See also Matthieu Solomon, 'The issue of corruption in recruitment, appointment and

It is the argument of this paper that this political economy is having profound consequences for politics – in all three countries. Firstly, it has led to high levels of inequality not only in terms of income but also in terms of land concentration. In Cambodia, for example, where the process of primitive accumulation has been most rapacious, the top 10% own 64% of the land and the top 1% own an estimated 20-30%. Moreover, 20% of the rural population is landless, a rate that is increasing by two percentage points a year.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, the emergence of this kind of political economy has led to the increased influence of business on politics, including at least a degree of state capture. This manifests itself in heavy behind the scenes lobbying of government by business as they try and influence the regulatory framework in their favour.<sup>39</sup> The growing influence of business on the state can also be seen in changes to Communist Party statutes to allow businesspeople to be Party members, and in all three countries, the election of prominent business people to parliament.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the close connection between government and business is prompting a bias towards capital in event of commercial disputes and is compounding an instinctive elite hostility towards independent labour unions.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, this ‘reform’ political economy can be directly linked to the failure of liberal governance reforms to make much progress. The dynamic is particularly evident in relation to public administration reform (PAR), which has been a mainstay of donor-led reforms in all three countries. Part of the PAR agenda has involved trying to streamline the bureaucracy by closing down those parts of it deemed surplus to requirements. However, while certain offices have been closed, new ones have sprung up in their place.<sup>42</sup> PAR has also involved trying to clarify administrative procedures, including civil servant job descriptions, but again progress here has been slow at best. While this is often puzzling to outsiders, such difficulties make perfect sense when one considers the centrality of money-making in respect of public office. Closing down government departments or clarifying job descriptions strikes at the heart of the discretionary behaviour on which officials depend to supplement their

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promotion of civil servants in Vietnam,’ Note for 3<sup>rd</sup> Anti-Corruption Dialogue, June 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Hughes, ‘Cambodia in 2007’, p. 71.

<sup>39</sup> Interviews in Hanoi, March 14-18, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Ben Bland, Vietnam: Getting Down to Business, June 3, 2011. <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2011/06/03/democracy-in-vietnam-getting-down-to-business/#axzz1SYomGAU3> (Last accessed July 19, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Hughes, ‘Cambodia in 2007’, p. 74; Bill Hayton, *Vietnam: Rising Dragon*, Yale University Press, 2010, pp. 126-127.

<sup>42</sup> PAR Steering Committee, ‘Report on the Review of the Implementation of the First Phase (2001-05) of the PAR Master Programme (2001-2010),’ Report No. 01/2006/BC-BC-CCHC, April 27, 2006, Hanoi, pp. 8-9

income and hence must be opposed.<sup>43</sup>

That the liberal-inspired PAR agenda has been resisted largely successfully comes across clearly in media coverage of difficulties encountered by businesses or citizens seeking to navigate the bureaucracy in Vietnam. Government rhetoric about ‘streamlined’ administrative procedures aside, it is noteworthy how many of the same complaints heard in the 1990s about difficult, time-consuming, and costly procedures continue to be heard today. All that has changed is that the practices which make navigating the bureaucracy so difficult have shifted from one area to another as various offices and certain kinds of activities are shut down.<sup>44</sup> Trends in public sector employment since the 1990s, which have been uniformly upwards despite the PAR agenda, tell a similar story.<sup>45</sup>

So far in the paper, we have emphasised two key factors which have worked to prevent the emergence of liberal politics, namely a conservative elite political culture and the close connection which exists in people’s minds between holding public office and various forms of personal advancement. While we would argue that such attitudes permeate the *whole system* in all three countries – and are not simply the preserve of a narrow elite – we are nevertheless witnessing new kinds of protest and citizen activism which did not exist previously. It is to this we now turn, bearing in mind that the picture is not identical across the three countries in question.

### *Spontaneous protest and nascent civil society*

In the 1980s, popular protests, or forms of organisation outside of the Party-state, were extremely rare. It is not that protests did not happen or some informal associations did not remain intact but protest tended to be more in the form of passive resistance, and the ruling parties permeated everyday life in a way that they do not

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<sup>43</sup> Gainsborough et al, ‘Corruption’.

<sup>44</sup> Edmund Malesky, ‘The Vietnam Provincial Competitiveness Index: Measuring Economic Governance for Private Sector Development. 2008 Final Report.’ Vietnam Competitiveness Initiative Policy Paper No. 13. Hanoi: Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) and United States Agency for International Development’s Vietnam Competitiveness Initiative (VNCI), 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Public sector employment in Vietnam was 3.1 million in 1995. By 2008 it was 4.1 million, having climbed steadily throughout the 1990s. General Statistics Office, General Statistics Office of Vietnam, official website [http://www.gso.gov.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=491](http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=491) (Last accessed May 9, 2011).

now.<sup>46</sup> This began to change, however, during the 1990s. Earlier, we spoke of the destalinisation of everyday life, and how in Cambodia civil society received a boost following the Paris peace accords and the UN presence. However, we also noted the closing down of the political space in Cambodia as Hun Sen has tightened his grip on power, and how in all three countries the regulatory environment governing civil society activity is uncertain and restrictive (both in theory and in practice). That said, things have not stood still. Small-scale protests – and sometimes quite large demonstrations – are commonplace as citizens have taken to the streets or set up camp outside government offices. In all three countries, the most common cause of protest is related to corruption and disputes over land.<sup>47</sup> However, Catholics have demonstrated in Vietnam – although there was a real estate component to this dispute too – and citizens in Cambodia have protested over a temple dispute with Thailand. Citizens in Vietnam have protested against Chinese action in the South China Sea with whom Vietnam has a territorial dispute.<sup>48</sup>

In Cambodia, the opposition has held political rallies although the climate for this is now circumscribed and the risks are high. In Vietnam and Laos opposition parties have not been allowed to form although some individuals and groups have sought to organise against the state. This includes the dissident organisation Bloc 8406 in Vietnam in 2006-07, and a one-off student/teacher protest in Laos in 1999.<sup>49</sup> However, in all cases, they have been repressed.

More significant in terms of political change than dissident or opposition activity, which is weak in all three countries, is a new form of behind-the-scenes activism by the countries' emerging middle class who through a range of networks and NGOs are beginning to lobby the state on a wide range of issues from disability to women's rights to resource extraction. The process is generally not well-institutionalised, and relies heavily on the personal connections of the activists and the willingness of state institutions to engage with civil society. It is also less well-developed in Laos than in either Vietnam or Cambodia. Nevertheless, there is a sense of real progress being made, as well-connected NGOs are more than able to 'work the system' and report

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<sup>46</sup> Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005; Gainsborough, 'Present but not Powerful', pp. 480-482.

<sup>47</sup> Steve Heder, 'Cambodia in 2010,' *Asian Survey*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2011, pp. 211-212; Hayton, *Vietnam*, pp. 26-45.

<sup>48</sup> Hayton, *Vietnam*, pp. 222-223; and 'South China Sea: Vietnamese hold anti-Chinese protest,' BBC News, June 5, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13661779> (Last accessed July 19, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Hayton, *Vietnam*, pp. 113-134; Carlyle A. Thayer, 'Laos in 1999: Economic Woes Drive foreign Policy,' *Asian Survey*, vol. 40, no.1, 2000, p.45.

results.<sup>50</sup> However, it is important to emphasise that this activist civil society is reformist in nature, is not pushing for an alternative political system, and indeed is often fiercely loyal towards the nation and the prevailing political system.<sup>51</sup>

This nascent civil society activity is, nevertheless, a consequence of the many social changes which have occurred in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos during the reform years. Generally speaking, and particularly in the case of the urban middle class, people are richer and better educated than previously. They travel more, are more likely to have worked for international organisations, and hence have more experience of how things are done in other countries. They also engage with a wider variety of media both old and new, including international media. Consequently, they are generally more confident and less willing to tolerate state excesses or abuse. As we have sought to emphasise, this does not mean they necessarily want to eradicate the one-party system but people are generally clearer about their rights and want a greater say in the decisions which affect them.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, there is a tension between this emerging ‘middle class’ mindset and the more conservative elite political culture which we mapped out earlier. However, the tension is not as great as one might think partly because this middle class is not uninfluenced by conservative elite political culture and vice versa. Relevant here is that the middle class is closely connected to or has emerged from the state – often with some family members still holding official positions. Moreover, those holding political office are not unaffected themselves by the social changes we have been talking about as they too travel, may have spent time in international organisations, and digest foreign media. In this way, we can say that the character of the ruling elite – and the political parties which house them – is itself changing although possibly not as quickly as the prevailing culture.<sup>53</sup>

The question is what this – and everything else we have said in the paper – adds up to in terms of its implications for politics in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos going forward.

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<sup>50</sup> Martin Gainsborough, Dang Huong Giang and Tran Thanh Phuong, Promoting efficient interaction between the National Assembly and civil society in Vietnam: Baseline Study, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V for European Union, Hanoi, June 2011. See also Andrew Wells-Dang, *Informal pathbreakers: civil society networks in China and Vietnam*, PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Interviews in Hanoi, March 14-18, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Kerkvliet et al, *Getting Organised*. See also Lisa B.W. Drummond and Mandy Thomas (eds.), *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

<sup>53</sup> For an attempt to capture this see Martin Gainsborough, ‘A Comparative Study of Governance Reform Options for Vietnam to 2020 Drawing on the Lessons from Asia,’ UK Department for International Development, Hanoi, 2007.

We look at this now.

**Conclusion: what political future for Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos?**

Political and economic forecasting is something economists and political scientists are notoriously bad at, notwithstanding the veritable industry which surrounds such activity. The failure to anticipate the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is one of the more famous examples although the more recent, so-called ‘Arab spring’ came with little warning either. That said, there are in fact only a limited number of options in terms of what can happen: that is, a regime can collapse, or be voted out of office, it can remain in power, and it can evolve into something different. Predicting when these things may happen, and the precise turn of events, is, of course, more difficult.

In light of our analysis, we would argue that regime collapse is the least likely option to befall the ruling parties in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In neither case, do these regimes have their backs against the wall. All of them are able to derive legitimacy from a variety of sources (economic, nationalism, provider of order, personal charisma). All also have functioning security forces capable of keeping people in line. Moreover, despite persistent protests against corruption, we are not in a situation where the population is likely to round on the regime as a whole in any of the three countries in question. Cambodia is arguably the least stable of the three countries because of the more brutal and rapacious nature of its primitive accumulation. However, it is also the state which acts with greatest impunity in terms of stamping out opposition.<sup>54</sup>

The collapse of communism in China would be likely to have repercussions for all three countries as would a collapse of communism in Vietnam for Laos and Cambodia. However, few, if any, scholars, are anticipating such an outcome in the near future. A more pressing issue is what happens in Cambodia when Hun Sen’s rule comes to an end. However, he is 60 years old, and so could rule for some years yet. Vietnam and Laos do not have pressing, personal, succession issues, owing to their greater emphasis on collective leadership.

Leaving aside the question of Hun Sen’s succession, our analysis leads us to anticipate the continuation of the existing regimes in all three states for some years yet combined with a gradual evolution of the underlying political system. Indeed, this

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<sup>54</sup> McCargo, ‘Cambodia’.

gradual evolution of the political system is what, we believe this paper shows, has been taking place over the last 15-20 years. That is, while there has been no change in the ruling parties – including in Cambodia where the CPP forced its way back into power despite losing the election – wider society has not stood still and to a limited extent this is reflected in the changing character of the ruling elite themselves. In time, this will widen the scope of what is possible.

In the long term, we would not rule out the possibility of the ruling parties in Vietnam and Laos moving to allow political party formation, or for existing opposition parties to be able to operate more freely in Cambodia. However, we are a long way from this point at the moment. This is supported by the paper's argument that the underlying political culture in the three states in question is changing very slowly. This underlying political culture is – as we have indicated – bound up with what we have referred to as a conservative, non-liberal, elite political culture, and the close connection which exists in people's minds between holding public office and making money. Both aspects are important in making sense of the character of the three states' political systems, and of the outlook of the elites which inhabit them. In particular, these two features make sense of the failure of liberal politics to take root.

Thus, the point we would want to make is that even if at some future date there were a move to allow opposition parties to operate in Vietnam and Laos, or to have free-reign in Cambodia, these underlying values we have highlighted are likely to continue to exert an influence on politics. Here, we would invoke the example of South Korea where traditional notions of politics (e.g. around the person of the president) give politics in that country a distinctive character despite it operating under a liberal-democratic framework.<sup>55</sup>

In relation to the cases looked at in this paper, a good way of getting at this issue is to ask whether those opposition forces which exist in Cambodia – albeit currently emasculated – stand apart from these underlying values we have highlighted, or alternatively whether they are solidly rooted in liberal politics. Our answer on both points would be a categorical no, such that if some version of the opposition were to ever find its way into political office, which is not likely in the short-term, they would take these values with them. Equally, to the extent that we are seeing more vibrant 'activist' civil society activity beginning to emerge in Vietnam and Laos, it would be a mistake to view this as thoroughly liberal in outlook – even if there are some liberal

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<sup>55</sup> Tat Yan Kong, 'Power Alternation in South Korea' *Government and Opposition* vol. 35, no. 3, 2000, pp. 370-391.

influences. Again, therefore, a change of regime or a shift to a multiparty system, if it were to happen, should not be equated automatically with the adoption of liberal values.

That said, it is worth asking how a change of regime or a move to embrace a multiparty political system – if it were to occur – might happen. The experience of other states again provides some pointers. One possibility is that the ruling party starts to see the existing political system as a liability and hence initiates change itself. This can happen in the face of widespread protest – as in South Korea in the late 1980s – or in the absence of it – as in Taiwan at around the same time. In Taiwan, the ruling Kuomintang initiated a dialogue with the opposition in 1986 to try and reverse the country's growing marginalisation in international politics as China re-engaged, not because it was under intense popular pressure to do so.<sup>56</sup> In South Korea, on the other hand, the presidential candidate, Roh Tae Woo broke ranks with the then president, Chun Doo Hwan in 1987 when he accepted the opposition's demands for direct presidential elections in the face of massive social and labour unrest.<sup>57</sup> This notion of a split in elite ranks at a time of crisis is quite a common way in which political change occurs. However, in both the Korean and the Taiwanese cases, the ruling parties won time for themselves insofar as it was some years before the opposition were able to win enough votes to rule on their own. One could imagine a similar situation playing itself out in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in years to come.

A variation on these two scenarios is that the ruling party seeks to undercut any emerging opposition movement by forming its own 'loyal' opposition. This approach is not dissimilar to that adopted by the People's Action Party in Singapore with its 'nominated members of parliament'.<sup>58</sup> Such an approach has the advantage that it is more acceptable to elites who are sceptical about opposition politics. However, the weakness of this approach is that it lacks legitimacy and hence is likely to fall flat in relation to those pushing for more radical change. Nevertheless, it is not out of the question that elites in Vietnam or Laos might choose to go this route to avoid what they fear would be divisive and destabilising political party formation.

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<sup>56</sup> Laurence Whitehead, 'Afterword: On Cultures and Contexts' in Antlov, *Cultural Construction of Politics*, p. 234.

<sup>57</sup> Sung-Joo Han, 'South Korea in 1987: The Politics of Democratisation' *Asian Survey* vol. 28, no. 1, 1988, pp. 52-61.

<sup>58</sup> Michael D. Barr, 'Perpetual Revisionism in Singapore: The Limits of Change', *Pacific Review* vol. 16, no. 1, 2003, pp. 77-97.

Whatever of these various routes Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos eventually take, what is certain is that the wholesale ascendancy of liberal politics is the least likely outcome.

