



A Comparative Survey of

*DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT*

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Political Change, Youth and Democratic  
Citizenship  
in Cambodia and Malaysia

Bridget Welsh  
Political Science, Singapore  
Management University  
bwelsh@smu.edu.sg

Alex Chuan-Hsien Chang  
Institute of Political Science,  
Academia Sinica  
Chang626@gate.sinica.edu.tw

## **Asian Barometer**

A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

# **Working Paper Series**

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### ***Contact Information***

***Asian Barometer Project Office***

***Department of Political Science***

***National Taiwan University***

***No.1, Sec.4, Roosevelt Road, Taipei,  
10617, Taiwan, R.O.C.***

***Tel: 886 2-3366 8456***

***Fax: 886-2-2365 7179***

***E-mail: [asianbarometer@ntu.edu.tw](mailto:asianbarometer@ntu.edu.tw)***

***Website: [www.asianbarometer.org](http://www.asianbarometer.org)***

## **Political Change, Youth and Democratic Citizenship in Cambodia and Malaysia**

Bridget Welsh and Alex Chang

### ***Introduction***

On the surface, this comparison of Cambodia and Malaysia may seem strange. Both countries are at different levels of development, and have considerable historical differences. Malaysia is a society touted for its stability, while Cambodia has been dealing with conflict through 1991 and is still grappling with the scars of a post-conflict society. Yet, on a number of important dimensions, these countries have conditions in common. First of all, over 50% of their population is under the age of 30, 63% and 56% respectively. As such, every election, the youth plays a major role in shaping the outcome. Second, both countries are hybrid regimes, caught between authoritarian conditions and democratic pressures. They have been moving in different directions politically. The trajectory in Cambodia since 1997 has been towards a more entrenched one-party system led by the Cambodian People's Party, dominated by Hun Sen who is Southeast Asia's longest serving strongman. In Malaysia after the retirement of its strongman Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 2003, the regime has faced pressure to reform, with the opposition making gains at the polls as a diffusion of power has taken root. What role, if any, will the youth play in pushing these countries toward more democratic alternatives? Will in fact the youth be agents of change, or strengthen incumbent one-party systems?

The answers to these questions are not easy to determine given the political uncertainties ahead in both countries. The analysis draws from a focus on the political attitudes of youth in the third wave of the Asia Barometer Survey data, conducted in 2011 and 2012 in Malaysia and Cambodia respectively. The argument developed is that youth in both countries will likely contribute to increasing pressures for democratization, but the impact of the youth on politics in the short term will be more keenly illustrated in Malaysia where political and economic conditions are more conducive for the youth to have a decisive impact on political transformation. Although conflicted, attitudes toward democratic citizenship among youth are arguably more positive in Malaysia than those in Cambodia. Nevertheless, the youth in Cambodia will play a major role in political transformation in Cambodia in the longer term, when conditions within the regime are changing due to a leadership transition in power away from strong man rule within the CCP and evolving economic conditions will facilitate a more empowered and disenchanted youth. This argument rests on the assumption that political and economic conditions shape the role that youth will play in politics and that their impact on democratic change will be a combination of attitudes and opportunity.

### ***Hybrid Regimes in Transition:***

Every year in Malaysia and Cambodia, hundreds of thousands of new voters become eligible to vote. In Malaysia, for example, an estimated 25% of the electorate is under the age of 30 in 2012. A similar dynamic is occurring in Cambodia, where demographic conditions showcase youth in large numbers and their role in shaping outcomes is strengthening. Younger voters were seen as decisive in the 2008 polls and this trend will continue in 2013. The focus on elections, formal politics, is the starting point of this analysis. It rests on the assumption that democratic change within these hybrid one-party systems will occur at the polls. While not dismissing the importance of civil society and local politics, the focus on national electoral politics is tied to the pattern of democratization in Asia, where pivotal elections have been the primary arena to bring about changes in democratic governance. This occurred, for example, in

the Philippines in 1986 and Indonesia in 1998-1999. Elections are especially important in hybrid regimes, as they are usually the dominant means of political participation and arenas where the incumbent regimes draw their legitimacy. These polls are usually competitive, although often constrained by flawed processes that undermine the fairness of the polls, including a captured election bureaucracy and cache of financial resources for the campaign for the incumbent.

Given the importance of elections, what are the factors that are shaping the electoral terrain? There are a number of interrelated economic and political factors. First of all, both countries have experienced rapid modernization, as incomes have more than tripled in the last three decades. Malaysia has experienced on average 5% economic growth since its independence in 1957, while Cambodia had a later start due to civil war, but since reaching a peace agreement in 1991 has undergone considerable development. In the last decade, Cambodia's economic growth has risen sharply, in some years growing by 10%. This intense and steady growth has contributed to broader social changes – urbanization, educational advancement, rise of a growing middle class and better access to information, among others. Both countries are at different points in their development; Malaysia has a GDP per capita three times that of Cambodia and only 3.6% poverty compared to Cambodia's 30.1%. Over 70% of Malaysia is urbanized, while Cambodia remains predominantly rural. In terms of education, more students are graduating from university in Malaysia, where an estimated 12% are completing tertiary education compared to an estimated 1% in Cambodia. These two hybrid regimes are experiencing a similar process, although are at different points in the modernization process.

In part due to the differences in where they are in modernizing, Malaysia and Cambodia are likely to face different economic trajectories. In Cambodia conditions remain optimistic for continued growth. The discovery of oil and gas reserves offers the incumbent government additional revenue for the expansion of infrastructure and social services, which remain rudimentary particularly in the rural areas. Cambodia has attracted investment, notably from China, as its manufacturing advantage in labor intensive industries and resource wealth has attracted business. In Malaysia, while many of the economic fundamentals remain strong, the trends have been less positive, as investment has contracted and growth rates declined. Most analyses, including the current government, acknowledge that Malaysia is locked in a “middle-income” trap where reforms are necessary to move the economy toward more robust growth. This different trend line in terms of economic expansion underscores the political environment. Central to this are real concerns for youth regarding economic opportunities, notably jobs, and the management of economic expectations, in terms of potentially rising incomes.

Malaysia and Cambodia's impressive economic growth has been accompanied by two potentially destabilizing conditions. The first of which is inequality. Malaysia has a GINI coefficient of .462. Cambodia's is not much lower at .444. These are among the highest in East Asia. The trajectory in inequality has been rising, as the pattern of economic development has been one of growth with inequality in the last decade. These hybrid regimes have to grapple with the fact that there is a growing divide in incomes in society and, while the middle classes in these societies are growing in size, there is a dynamic of widening economic polarization.

The second destabilizing condition, and arguably contributing factor to inequality, is endemic corruption. Not only is the practice part of the fabric of economic growth, tied to land development and the use of natural resources such as timber, it is interwoven into the political economy. The dominant political

parties consolidate their power with patronage, and use the funds from economic development to shore up their political positions. In Cambodia this has contributed to the strengthening of the CCP, and historically in Malaysia it contributed to the consolidated position of the dominant party UMNO. While in Malaysia patronage to the grassroots have decayed, in contrast to this practice in Cambodia, the link between state-led development, political control of state resources, and use of these resources for maintaining political power persists. As the party power has evolved increasing individuals in the dominant parties have used the resources for personal gain, in alliance with private sector business cronies, raising the ire of many in the public who question the use of public position and resources for personal gain. The prominence of corruption undermines the credibility of these dominant party systems, particularly in the context of rising inequalities.

It is thus no wonder that electorates are divided in their assessments of the regime. Earlier work in examining regime support in Cambodia and Malaysia point to divided publics, with sharp splits in support for the current hybrid systems. Less than 60% of citizens in both countries support their regimes with sharp polarization of outlooks on whether their system of government is performing. In Malaysia the division has manifested itself with increasingly competitive polls and rising support for the opposition. In 2008 the opposition coalition broke the 2/3rds hold of the incumbent government in parliament and in the sixteen by-elections since then won half of them. In Cambodia the differences in regime support have yet to manifest themselves electorally, as the opposition's position in parliament remains limited.

This has to do with current political conditions. In the case of Malaysia, there has been a transition from strongman rule with the retirement of Mahathir Mohamad in 2003. This has resulted in two leaders taking the reins of the dominant party and attempting to steer the party towards reform. UMNO in Malaysia has not significantly moved out of the mold of using state resources and attracted considerable criticism for its inability to transform. The constraints from within the dominant party and increasing pressure from the public to democratize and address economic and social challenges has placed the incumbent government on the defensive. In Cambodia, the opposite dynamic is present, as the strongman Hun Sen remains firmly in the seat of power, managing the factions within his party adeptly. He places others on the defensive, and manages to control Cambodia's development process through strategic advantage. And while there are calls for reform, particularly by civil society and the donor community, these have largely been deflected, as more incidents of the human rights violations in the use of violence against critics and practices of land grabbing have occurred. In Malaysia the opposition has used the space after Mahathir's retirement to regroup and offer itself as an electoral alternative, while in Cambodia the opposition remains fragmented, either in exile or on the margins, with constraints on carrying out their activities on the ground, notably in rural areas.

The contexts for potential change in Cambodia and Malaysia are shaped by modernization, economic trajectories, inequality, corruption, strongman political control and legacies and opposition alternatives. In the Cambodian environment, the strongman leadership of Hun Sen has the advantage of position politically due to his control over his party as well as more favorable economic conditions to deliver concrete changes in service provision and economic opportunities. This is in spite of the inequality, corruption and rising use of coercion. The advantage is in comparison to conditions in Malaysia where pressures for reform haven been compounding, and economic and political environments are constraining the incumbent governments.

### *Youth as Democratic Citizens:*

Where do youth fit in these evolving political transitions of these hybrid regimes? Will the youth become a group to reinforce the pressure for change or will they opt for reinforcing the positions of incumbency and the potential economic opportunities this might yield. Or will the youth be divided? Here is where we turn to the results of the ABS third wave survey, as shown on Table 1.

*Table 1: Youth attitudes toward Democratic Citizenship in Malaysia and Cambodia*

	Malaysia	Cambodia
Speak Without Fear	79.8	68.1
Able to Join Organization	83.9	87.8
Government Responsive	32.2	47.7
Government Pays Attention due to Elections	31.9	25.9
Almost/Most Corrupt Local	74.6	60.8
Almost/Most Corrupt National	67.7	50.5
<i>Support for Democracy</i>		
-Democracy Always Preferable	13.1	17.4
-Authoritarian Rule Preferable	15.7	30.1
-Doesn't Matter	71.2	52.5
Support Economic Development over Democracy	76.2	71.6
Reducing Income Inequality over Freedom	75	56.4
Ability to Participate	60.1	67.6
Little Influence	64.1	65.4
Government Like Head Family	33.4	32.8
Government Should Decide Ideas	27.6	16.6
Judges Consult Executive	42.1	33.3
Too many ideas lead to Chaos	24.8	32.4
Engage Difference with Coworkers	55.2	30.7
Interested in Politics	51.8	43.8
Follow News About Politics Often	36.3	32.8
Talk About Politics Frequently	34.6	57.9
System Government Needs Major Change	51.5	43.8
No Power to Change Government	79.8	81.9
Democracy Best Form	12.1	5.9

The first finding that emerges from the results of the ABS findings of youth views toward democratic change is that there is no consistent view favoring democracy across youth in both countries, but surprising consistency on similar issues among youth in both countries. For example, youth in both countries hold similar views about their inability to change the government, 79.8% in Malaysia and 81.9% in Cambodia. This observation of the common positions of youth in the two hybrid regimes is striking.

Second, the views among youth toward their regimes are conflicted. On the one hand, youth in both countries point to problems in democratic governance. They acknowledge the serious problem of corruption and call for major change in large numbers, 51.5% in Malaysia and 43.8% in Cambodia. They highlight challenges in government responsiveness and problems with attentiveness of government. Yet, while a large share of youth feels a sense of political efficacy in their ability to participate in politics and

are interested in politics, they are clearly more circumspect about the ability to bring about change. Only a third of youth follow the news regularly and clearly see limits on the ability to bring about “major” change.

The countries youth also clearly prioritize economic development. Youth in both countries put economic development first, over democracy. Majorities of youth also prioritize addressing inequality over freedom, especially in Malaysia. This suggests that how the government performs in the economy and over the issue of inequality will be important for youth.

Where Malaysian and Cambodian youth differ, however is in the underlying views of democracy. Nearly a third of youth in Cambodia that prefer authoritarian rule, half of that in Malaysia. The attitudes in both countries show less support of underlying political traditionalism, but on questions associated with the checks and balances of power, Malaysians are less supportive to more democratic measures. Cambodia may broadly support authoritarian rule, while in Malaysia on more specific elements there is more ambiguous support for greater horizontal accountability. The results overall suggest different conceptions of democracy and varied support of its elements.

Given these mixed results, what are the likely lines of action that the youth will follow. Comparatively, Malaysian youth – given their higher recognition of problems of corruption and attention to inequality and greater move away from authoritarianism, are more inclined to democratic expansion than the youth in Cambodia. This said, Malaysian youth cannot be seen as having a clear and consistent position in advocating for broader democracy.

#### ***Underlying Factors Affecting Democratic Citizenship of Youth:***

To appreciate how youth may play a role in these two countries, it is also important to look at what are the drivers of differences in views over democratic citizenship. There are distinct country specific factors. For example, in Malaysia ethnic differences shape attitudes. In Cambodia, the urban-rural divide is also prominent. Yet, overall, the element that stands out among these countries is the shared drivers of difference. These include education, income and religiosity.

Higher education of youth contributes to more democratic citizenship. We find in Malaysia that those with higher education have less faith in democracy as a system, but more belief in the need to change the system and introduce “major change”. More educated Malaysian youth also have more faith in their capacity to change the government compared to those with less education. In Cambodia we find that those with less education have more traditional values, e.g. more support to follow the leader. Also less educated Cambodian youth have more negative views that society will become chaotic and worry about conflict among families. Like Malaysia, there is more interest among university educated students in Cambodia and more discussion of politics. Those with secondary school education, compared to those in university, believe the government needs major change. This difference notwithstanding, the common thread is that education is linked to greater democratic citizenship. Malaysia with its larger share of university students, has more apparent conditions for this driver to be activated.

The second common thread is income. In both countries low income youth support traditional values and are less inclined to be engaged in politics. They see the government as something to be followed and obeyed. Poorer youths also show less interest in politics and do not acknowledge the corruption as much

as those with higher incomes. The larger share of poorer youth in Cambodia curtails pressures for democratic change.

The final common explanatory driver of difference is religiosity. Malaysia is a predominantly Muslim country, with religious pluralism, while Cambodia is overwhelmingly Buddhist. These differences in religious practice would suggest different outlooks. This is not the case, however. Religiosity marks greater concern with corruption and inequality. It also shapes greater engagement and political efficacy. In Malaysia, for example, the very religious believe elections have impact on government and have considerably difference in perceptions of corruption, with 32.4% of very religious youth believing everyone is corrupt compared to the average total of 12.3%. More religious in Cambodia have more faith in democracy as the best system, 61.1% compared to 29% of those not religious, and stronger commitments to addressing inequality. Yet, in both countries those that are less religious spend less time discussing politics. Less religious Malaysians are more likely to frequently discuss politics, 53.3% compared to 29% of those more religious. Less religious Cambodians are more interested in politics 37% compared to 12.2% and discuss politics with their families 66.7% compared to 58.4%. In both countries, however, more religious youth follow news more often. This dimension of a religiosity suggests that the social fabric, and concerns with moral governance are shaping and enhancing democratic citizenship. Comparatively, there is greater religious activism in Malaysia compared to Cambodia among youth, suggesting that this driver also favors more potential for change in Malaysia among youth.

#### ***Inter-generational Dynamics in Malaysia and Cambodia:***

Another dimension to democratic citizenship in these countries lies with how the youth compare to older citizens. Tables 2 & 3 show the comparison of democratic attitudes of those below and above 30. The results show convincingly that there are very little differences in attitudes toward democratic citizenship among youth and older citizens. In fact, in Malaysia older citizens show slightly more engagement with democratic citizenship perspectives.

*Table 2: Intergenerational Attitudes toward Democratic Citizenship in Cambodia*

<i>Democratic Citizenship Attitudes</i>	<i>Below 30</i>	<i>Above 30</i>
Speak Without Fear	68.1	68.7
Able to Join Organization	87.8	82.5
Government Responsive	47.7	45.9
Government Pay Attention due to Elections	25.9	24.2
Almost/Most Corrupt Local	60.8	43.4
Almost/Most Corrupt National	50.5	56.8
Support for Democracy		
-Democracy Always Preferable	17.4	10.4
-Authoritarian Under Some Circumstances	30.1	30.3
-Doesn't Matter	52.5	59.3
Support Economic Development	71.6	68.7
Reducing Income Inequality over Freedom	56.4	46.9
Ability to Participate	67.6	69.7
Politics Too Complicated for Me	82.9	82.3
Little Influence	65.4	60.1
Government Like Head Family	32.8	27.5



Government Should Decide Ideas	16.6	15.4
Judges Consult Executive	33.3	32.6
Too many ideas lead to Chaos	32.4	34.6
Engage Difference with Coworkers	30.7	34.3
Interested in Politics	43.8	44.2
Follow News About Politics Often	32.8	23.8
Talk About Politics Frequently	57.9	58.5
System Government Needs Major Change	43.8	38.2
No Power to Change Government*	81.9	83.6
Democracy Best Form	5.9	6.9

*Table 3: Intergenerational Attitudes toward Democratic Citizenship in Malaysia*

	Below 30	Above 30
Speak Without Fear	79.8	82.3
Able to Join Organization	83.9	82.2
Government Responsive	32.2	32.1
Government Pay Attention due to Elections	31.9	29.8
Almost/Most Corrupt Local	74.6	77.9
Almost/Most Corrupt National	67.7	69.8
Support for Democracy		
-Democracy Always Preferable	13.1	8.3
-Authoritarian Rule Preferable	15.7	12.3
-Doesn't Matter	71.2	78
Support Economic Development	76.2	75.2
Reducing Income Inequality over Freedom	75	71.5
Ability to Participate	60.8	57.1
Politics too Complicated	73.9	66
Little Influence	64.1	64.1
Government Like Head Family	33.4	29.8
Government Should Decide Ideas	27.6	28.1
Judges Consult Executive	42.1	47.4
Too many ideas lead to Chaos	24.8	31.3
Engage Difference with Coworkers	55.2	49.2
Interested in Politics	51.8	49.4
Follow News About Politics Often	36.3	21.9
Talk About Politics Frequently	34.6	27.8
System Government Needs Major Change	51.5	46.5
No Power to Change Government	79.8	87.3
Democracy Best Form	12.1	8.9

The lack of sharp differences points to the fact that youth in these countries do not appear to have distinct cohort positions on democratic governance, indicating that they are not likely to be differentiated from older citizens, at least at this juncture.

***Tentative Conclusions:***

In light of these findings, what preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this study of youth attitudes toward democratic citizenship. Youth in Malaysia and Cambodia remain untapped reservoirs for political transformation. In Malaysia, political conditions are ripe for youth to play a more prominent role in bringing about democratic change, in large part due to the political terrain of opportunity rather than their underlying attitudes. One cannot rule out the youth as being a major force in bringing about change in the next election. In Cambodia, economic, social and political conditions are less favorable for more democratic pressures, in comparison. The conflicted positions and differences among youth in both countries, however, do not point to a decisive youth push toward democratic citizenship in the electoral arena. Key will be the alliances youth make with older citizens toward change and whether conditions evolve to enhance the opportunity for democratic change.