



LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL POLITICS OF CAMBODIA: SOME FINDINGS AND THEIR POLICY IMPLICATIONS¹

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This policy brief highlights the major findings of a study of local leadership in three communes and provides an overview of associated opportunities and challenges, especially regarding the changing roles and expectations of leaders as a result of decentralisation under neo-patrimonial arrangements. It looks particularly at different types of local leaders' mediation of the relationship between the state and people. It suggests policy implications for central and local governments and civil society organisations to capture the effects of decentralisation.

The leadership in local politics study aims to identify different types of local leaders in rural Cambodian villages based on villagers' perceptions, identify what constitutes their legitimacy and discover whether they are contributing to bringing the state closer to the people, one of the main objectives of decentralisation. The study mainly employs qualitative methodology in which survey interviews were first carried out among villagers to identify leaders before conducting in-depth interviews with identified leaders. It also involves researchers observing leadership activities.

OVERVIEW

More than seven years after decentralisation reform began, in which citizens elect their commune representatives, the study found wider representation in local leadership. With wider

representation, there are increased numbers of councillors as well as village committees. In particular, more women are seen as local leaders as more opportunities and positions are opened to them. We have also seen more experienced and motivated leaders, who are stabilising local community and its leadership since their experience earns them a degree of legitimacy among the people and they are willing and able to address local problems as they have a good understanding of the localities. Some local leaders are doing a good job of linking the state with the people. Local leaders are quite effective in mobilising resources, and for this reason they are listened to by the government and state officials. Decentralisation is working to this extent.

However, there are still issues to address. It was found that remaining hierarchical arrangements and patrimonial influences hamper the effectiveness and speed of the reform. In particular, this brief discusses the prevalent party politics that exploit patronage networks as a means to consolidate power. In general, this undermines and constrains decentralisation.

It is often argued and concluded that party politics are made possible through weak or absent institutions and a weak civil society. These permit a lack of power among local authorities while increasing real power and influence rest with the economically strong, who are influential in both local and national politics.

¹ This policy brief is based on a CDRI working paper, *Leadership in Local Politics of Cambodia: A Case Study of Three Communes in Three Provinces*, by Thon Vimealea, Ou Sivhuoch, Eng Netra and Ly Tem (2009).

FINDINGS FROM CASE STUDIES

1. Local Leadership Remains Remarkably Unchanged

The study identified that local administrative leaders have been almost the same faces over the past two decades. Most are over 49 years of age and have had some sort of leadership role since 1979 or even earlier. Their legitimacy rests more on traditional than legal-rational characteristics; from the case studies it appears that traditional legitimacy and past leadership, albeit irrelevant in some cases, provide the initial chance for a leader to be selected and eventually elected. This makes it difficult for new candidates, even those with better capacity. New candidates need to network with political parties or powerful persons to enter the political realm and eventually stand for election.

Also, it is widely known and understood that the mandated roles and responsibilities of commune leaders have changed with decentralisation, but their activities, and to an extent their capacities, remain pretty much unchanged. This constrains the new roles and meeting different and increasing demands.

2. Local Leadership Lacks Autonomy and Independence

Because deconcentration was implemented later than decentralisation, the accompanying power and resources are not fully provided to commune leaders. In addition, their annual funding, from the Commune/Sangkat Fund (CSF), is meagre and does not provide the resources for independence.

Commune leaders have to depend on party backing and finances for their development projects because the CSF is sufficient only for administrative purposes.² Political parties as well as citizens expect commune councillors to deliver development projects, especially infrastructure. Such outputs contribute significantly to a leader's legitimacy. Therefore, they have to depend on informal funding and support from their own political parties, diverting their accountability.

2 Details of this are also discussed in Rusten et al. 2004.

3. Party Patrons and the Economically Powerful Increasingly Co-Opt Local Leadership

Political parties are also financed by rich patrons. This gives increased influence to people who are building monopolies over commune resources and in their businesses—elite capture. With their wealth, power and networks, they are able to strengthen their authority, increase their influence in politics to serve their agendas and bypass local authorities, undermining the efforts of local natural resource management³ and of decentralisation as a whole. These individuals co-opt local authorities either by joining or having their relatives join local, district, provincial or national politics, by contributing money to the commune or by building networks with powerful politicians or national figures.

Support from these individuals seems crucial because it can help commune councils to deliver development projects that would otherwise not be possible, but the cost of such support to the community is high, and it can undermine local leadership and democracy.

4. Traditional figures are important intermediaries and mobilisers although their spheres of influence are limited and they increasingly face co-option

Elders, who were among those identified as leaders by the villagers, are sought out by villagers for advice on moral and marital issues and by local leaders for advice on commune or village boundaries and conflict resolution. They are mediators between the state and the people; however, their influence is very limited and they increasingly face co-option into political parties and party politics. This is especially true of *achars*, the upholders of religious ethics, who are increasingly cultivating even stronger political

3 Some are involved in resource extraction. In one of the communes, a local *oknha* works with a forest concession company and has been logging across the commune. His other business activities gain preferential treatment and bypass the authorities because he supported his brother in local politics and the *oknha* himself was very influential locally and nationally. The villagers in this commune had been dependent on the forest for their livelihoods and because of such poor resource management now suffer greatly. The forest was gone in only a few years and has now become a land concession from which the *oknha* received more than 1000 hectares.

patronage because most of the contributions for their pagoda development can be obtained only from politicians and wealthy people associated with a certain party. Co-option of these leaders removes the promise of a strong civil society and the possibility of representation of mass demands or mobilisation.

5. NGOs and CBOs Are Weak Leaders

Civil society organisations, especially NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs), were found to be quite weak. NGOs focus mainly on providing material assistance to boost family economies and the poor's access to basic services, or providing training on domestic violence or agricultural technology. There has not been much focus on building a strong civic culture, which would require long-term commitment and vision among these NGOs and more systematic and coordinated programmes of interaction and building rapport with villagers in support of such things as representation. Moreover, they function under external funding and are influenced by donor agendas rather than local home-grown agendas with mass participation from villagers. So NGOs are short-term oriented, which constrains their potential as mediators between the state and the people. Only a very few CBOs were found in our case studies, and they were weak, ineffective and under-functioning due to a lack of funds, support, participation, interaction with authorities, power, capacity and trust.⁴

6. Conclusion

Weak institutions are compromised by informal arrangements within a context of political patronage networks. Local leaders face contested lines of accountability. Shortcomings of little decision-making power and independence will persist if they continue to be caught up in party politics. Their ability to carry out their mandates and deliver services is greatly undermined by their dependence on party finance and support. Such backing aids the wealthy, who are able to influence and shape the

development agenda to benefit their businesses. The co-option of popular informal leaders opens opportunities to link the people with the state but is done more in the interest of consolidating party influence and power. Civil society is one of the crucial players (actually the primary player) in linking the state and society, but because civil society organisations function with a more short-term vision, they are not considered as leaders who can represent or help villagers. This is disappointing for democracy because it means that civic culture and engagement remain to be built.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. Improve Internal Party Discipline and Open Space for New Candidates

Leadership stability shows that preference for leaders with traditional legitimacy is high, for both political parties and the people. However, the study also found that the people are increasingly ready to vote out the current leader should they be treated unfairly or exploited, but this can be done only if there is a choice of a new and better candidate, which is still lacking. Therefore, political parties should be willing to identify and accept new, younger and more capable individuals who are able to serve villagers and carry out their mandates. There should be an internal party discipline that sanctions members who have acted badly in office and rewards those who do well and raise the party's reputation, performance and legitimacy.

In selecting their candidates, political parties should give priority to merit and previous work performance in addition to popularity and capacity. Co-option of individuals who are popular and well known among villagers but who might not be interested in serving the people and the state, or co-opting them to prevent them joining other parties, is not a win-win solution. There should be more political will among parties, especially the ruling party, to open up to new candidates and give more choice of candidates to villagers.

⁴ Details can be found in CDRI's working paper 35.

2. Improve Commune Councils' Accountability through Financial Autonomy and Increased Funding

The Law on Commune/Sangkat Administration states that communes can impose taxes and are entitled to other sources of revenue, but the organic law says sub-national taxes should be established by a law, which is yet to be passed. Aside from such a law, local administrative leaders need to be supported and guided to be more prepared to collect local taxes.

Increased financial resources of communes will increase their effectiveness and willingness to respond to and be accountable to citizens. Once local leaders can enforce tax collection, for example, the concept of social contract can be gradually built. Through this, local leaders would also have more power to deal with natural resource management.

3. Increased Autonomy and Independence of Councils Could Also Reduce Party Politics and Co-option of Religious Leaders

Implementation of the organic law and the political will to devolve full authority and decision making to communes, coupled with increased financial autonomy of councils, will help councils to deal with sensitive crucial issues such as natural resource management, protecting natural resources from monopolistic exploitation. It would also reduce the dependence of political parties and local authorities on informal funding from rich patrons, and their potential to co-opt local politics.

Co-option of religious institutions and leaders could also be reduced. However, the study found that local pagodas are influenced by both local rich people and party patrons or politicians. Sometimes pagodas exclude those who belong to other parties, and this affects people's attitudes and perceptions of pagodas. Feeling left out of village religious and social events, villagers can become disaffected with the pagoda over time. In

this case, hope again rests on the political will and party discipline to gain genuine legitimacy through popular democratic means rather than by co-opting local institutions.

4. Coordination and Cooperation Are Needed between NGOs, CBOs and Local Authorities

Last but perhaps most important is the role of a strong civil society in building democracy. Our study confirms the view of much literature that civil society in Cambodia is still very weak. More and better coordination among civil society and with other related institutions is needed to ease overlap, avoid inconsistencies and enhance demand-focused services. Civil society organisations need more local involvement in both their establishment and functioning, and projects should be more systematic, with long-term focus and increased focus on representation. Organisations meant to represent the people such as CBOs are basically non-functional due to the lack of power, authority and support, so it is important that wide support be given to them, and that their roles vis-à-vis commune councillors are clarified to strengthen their protection of commune resources and villagers' interests.

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