

## Historical Legacies and Their Impact on Cambodia's Democratic Transition 1993

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**Abstract.** The research explores how Cambodia's democratic transition evolved after the 1993 UNTAC-led period through an examination of its historical background. This research evaluates how French colonial rule together with the Khmer Rouge period and Vietnamese occupation have shaped Cambodia's parliamentary system and democratic practices. The research demonstrates how historical institutionalism explains how past occurrences established permanent political frameworks which maintain power centralization and elite dominance in post-1993 Cambodia. The research demonstrates that although the UNTAC period introduced democratic norms through multi-party elections the political system continues to be dominated by historical factors which block complete democratic consolidation. The research helps explain how post-conflict democratization processes encounter barriers stemming from historical trauma which has implications for nations undergoing comparable democratic transitions. Future research needs to investigate external actor involvement in democratization processes and perform comparative studies of post-conflict transitions to better understand how authoritarian legacies can be overcome.

**Keywords:** democratic transition, historical legacies, UNTAC, Cambodian People's Party (CPP), Khmer Rouge, political patronage, democratization challenges, post-1993 Cambodia

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### 1. Introduction

The democratic transition of Cambodia after 1993 demonstrates how historical backgrounds merged with political structures and social cultural patterns. The political system of Cambodia has been shaped by its historical legacies which determine its structure and its functional and evolutionary development. The democratic development of Cambodia since the UNTAC-led transition in the early 1990s directly results from its complicated historical background which includes French colonial rule and the Khmer Rouge regime and Vietnamese military control. The research investigates how past traumatic events continue to affect Cambodia's parliamentary system after 1993 to understand their lasting effects on the nation's political landscape.

The main research questions that direct this investigation are: Which historical factors have shaped both the organizational design and operational dynamics of Cambodia's parliamentary system? The UNTAC-led transition established democratic norms which have undergone changes throughout the years. This research aims to study the complex relationship between Cambodia's historical developments and its political framework following the 1993 elections by investigating how previous governments had influenced modern democratic operations.

Throughout the twentieth century Cambodia experienced political instability and institutional weaknesses because its system alternated between monarchic rule and authoritarian governance and revolutionary regimes. The monarchy's transformation into the Khmer Republic during the

1970s, followed by the Khmer Rouge's genocide and Vietnamese military control created lasting impacts on Cambodia's institutional structure. According to Gray (2014) justice functions as an endless process without predetermined conclusions which helps explain the Cambodian transition's ongoing pursuit of democratic future governance (Gray, 2014).

The political situation after the 1993 UNTAC transition becomes more complex because of the state-led violence and political patronage. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) maintained control of the country during the democratic period because it had built extensive political networks through the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese rule. Chandler (2004) notes that the Cambodian political system was designed to allow a few powerful elites to maintain control while maintaining a democratic appearance (Chandler, 2004).

The United Nations Transitional Authority Cambodia (UNTAC) mission established the fundamental political institutions of post-conflict Cambodia through its efforts to implement democratic principles such as elections and political pluralism. The political elites maintained their control over democratic institutions through manipulative practices which hindered the development of genuine democratic values during the mission. Becker (1998) states that the Khmer Rouge's emergence and Cambodian genocide cannot be understood without understanding the historical and social environment which led to these events (Becker, 1998).

The research uses historical institutionalism to analyze how the Khmer Rouge rule and Vietnamese state-building operations shaped Cambodia's parliamentary framework. The 1993 Constitution marked a significant step in Cambodia's democratic transition yet it preserved several past-oriented elements including strong central power alongside weak opposition parties. The institutional framework of Cambodia which developed from its violent past creates obstacles for democracy to become established as a stable system. Gray (2014) emphasizes that justice needs narrative structure because how we tell the past determines both its application and implementation (Gray, 2014). The interlinked political, historical, and cultural legacies create significant obstacles for democratization in post-conflict societies that still struggle with their historical trauma.

The research uses qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources with historical institutionalism as its core theoretical basis. This research analyzes Cambodia's parliamentary development and maintains critical evaluation of political events and actors to show how democratic norms from 1993 have not eliminated authoritarian practices.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Historical Institutionalism**

Historical institutionalism (HI) presents a theoretical framework which examines how past events through time influence political institutions and systems. According to this framework political structures evolve from decisions made during important historical moments which then determine democratic transition paths. Historical institutionalism offers essential understanding of political transitions because it explains how past occurrences such as colonial rule and authoritarian regimes and violent conflict establish permanent institutional patterns that affect current political systems <sup>#\_ftn1</sup>. Historical institutionalism provides an essential perspective to analyze Cambodia's post-1993 democratic transition because it shows how colonialism and genocide together with foreign interventions have formed lasting political institutions that affect current democratic practices. Pierson (2000) explains that historical institutionalism demonstrates "path dependency" because previous decisions form political structures which determine subsequent political development.

The political institutions of Cambodia developed through colonial rule and authoritarian regimes which strongly influenced both institutional development and democratic practices. The French colonial administration (1863–1953) established a centralized political system that destroyed traditional local political institutions throughout Cambodia. The political culture developed through top-down control mechanisms which maintained their influence after independence.

Becker (1998) observes that the French colonial administration in Cambodia established "weak institutional frameworks" which became the basis for future authoritarian political systems. The historical political structures of Cambodia became more established during the 1970s when the country shifted from monarchy to republic under Sihanouk and then the Khmer Rouge regime despite the destabilizing periods of violence. The Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) attempted to eliminate all political and social institutions which led to a power vacuum that the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea was partially occupied. The Khmer Rouge destroyed political and social institutions according to Becker (1998) which resulted in a society that lost its ability to trust government institutions.

The practice of personalized rule which placed power in the hands of individual leaders or small elite groups established itself as a fundamental characteristic of Cambodian politics that continued from the Khmer Rouge period into the post-1993 era. According to Chandler (2004) Cambodia's political system has enabled power to accumulate among a small number of elite leaders because of both colonial and Khmer Rouge historical influences. The political system of Cambodia has maintained its power structure in the hands of few elite leaders since the establishment of democratic institutions in 1993. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has ruled since the Khmer Rouge era and continues to dominate political institutions because these historical legacies persist.

Historical institutionalism provides a framework to understand why Cambodia maintained its undemocratic practices after the 1993 democratic transition. The 1993 UNTAC-led transition implemented democratic norms through elections and political pluralism yet Cambodia's historical background continues to hinder complete norm implementation. According to Gray (2014), justice requires narrative because the method through which the past is presented determines both justice application and implementation. The political process of Cambodia reflects both structural and memory-based aspects of its historical legacies. The political elites of Cambodia have frequently used democratic institutions to block the development of authentic democratic systems. The ruling party maintains power control according to Chandler (2004) while opposition parties encounter substantial barriers to effectively participate in politics.

The historical institutionalist framework demonstrates its best fit for studying Cambodia's political system because it reveals how past events influence current developments. The framework reveals the reasons behind Cambodia's democratic transition which has struggled to establish authentic democratic practices even though formal democratic institutions exist. HI explains how power centralization and authoritarian governance together with weak institutions remain significant barriers to democracy consolidation in Cambodia. The framework reveals the persistent nature of political practices and patterns which developed during Cambodia's colonial and authoritarian and revolutionary periods #\_ftn2 .

Historical institutionalism functions as an appropriate analytical tool for Cambodia's political system because it both reveals historical influences and demonstrates how political structures and practices persist across time. Through this framework researchers can study how Cambodia's difficult past restricts its complete adoption of democratic governance.

### **3. Historical Legacies: From French Colonialism to the UNTAC Period**

#### **3.1 French Colonialism (1863–1953)**

French colonialism dominated Cambodia for 90 years from 1863 until 1953 which established political fundamental structures and institutions of the country. The French colonial government built a centralized administrative system that destroyed the traditional political institutions of Cambodia. The French colonial administration created a hierarchical system which focused on maintaining colonial control thus weakening both traditional leaders and community-based governance networks #\_ftn3 . Becker (1998) explains that colonial powers substituted French officials for local leaders which resulted in the destruction of traditional governance systems

and established dependence on centralized authority. The move toward centralized governance established a political culture in Cambodia which maintained power concentration among few elites beyond independence time.

The centralized administrative systems established during French colonial rule maintained their influence on post-independence Cambodia and directed its political developments through multiple decades. The political institutions of early Cambodia relied on bureaucratic systems imposed by France but these institutions served colonial interests instead of developing democratic governance. According to Chandler (2004) French rule established political instability through its centralized power structure because it created an institutional framework that lacked effective local governance systems.

### **3.2 Sihanouk Era and the Khmer Republic (1953–1975)**

The Cambodian political development experienced a major transformation when King Sihanouk led the nation to adopt a republican system during the 1950s. Sihanouk faced political instability because his republican leadership struggled between maintaining monarchical traditions and establishing republican institutions. His governance style which focused on personal authority destroyed the existing institutional framework #\_ftn4 . According to Chandler (2004) the Sihanouk period combined strong leadership with weak institutions which created political instability throughout the era. The political system of Cambodia remained unstable during this period because Sihanouk tried to create national unity yet the government depended on his personal leadership instead of developing strong institutions.

During this time the political system developed into a highly personalized framework which placed the leader at the core of power. The political institutions of Cambodia inherited from this system became ineffective at handling opposition and civil disturbances. The coup led by Lon Nol resulted in the monarchy's collapse and the creation of the Khmer Republic which demonstrated the political instability that characterized Cambodia during this time. According to Gray (2014) the political system failed to maintain stability because power concentrated in one ruler while democratic norms collapsed due to insufficient institutional development.

### **3.3 Khmer Rouge Regime (1975–1979)**

During the Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979 Cambodia experienced its most tragic period in history. The Khmer Rouge attempted to transform Cambodian society through radical means which resulted in the total collapse of all political and social and economic systems. Becker (1998) describes how Pol Pot led the Khmer Rouge to eliminate traditional governance and private property and cultural expressions because they opposed their communist utopian vision. The Khmer Rouge implemented policies which resulted in massive Cambodian deaths alongside state institution destruction and complete social collapse #\_ftn5 .

The Khmer Rouge period of institutional destruction created enduring distrust toward governance while simultaneously reducing political participation in Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge actions created deep population-wide distrust of government institutions because the state directly perpetrated mass violence and repression according to Chandler (2004). The political landscape of Cambodia remained severely damaged by the genocide trauma even after the Khmer Rouge collapsed because the population lost trust in institutions which had been destroyed by the state. The lack of democratic norms after the Khmer Rouge collapse stemmed from the institutional void that resulted from their destruction.

### **3.4 Vietnamese Occupation and the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–1989)**

After the Khmer Rouge lost power Cambodia became a Vietnamese-controlled state when the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was founded in 1979. The Vietnamese-backed government aimed to rebuild state institutions which the Khmer Rouge had eliminated. The period brought back central authority and power consolidation within the communist party.

The Vietnamese government exercised deep influence on Cambodian governance through this period which determined political institutions and policies for multiple years ahead (Gray, 2014). The political system that emerged from one-party rule during this time would later affect Cambodia's democratic transition in the 1990s #\_ftn6 .

The Vietnamese-backed one-party rule during this time period established a political framework which shaped the post-1993 Cambodian political landscape by severely suppressing all forms of opposition. The centralized power structure that developed during this time period restricted the growth of pluralistic politics and democratic norms and political opposition development. The CPP maintained its power grip in the post-1993 period because it originated from the Vietnamese-supported regime which used control and patronage methods to maintain its rule (Chandler, 2004).

### **3.5 UNTAC Period (1991–1993)**

The UNTAC-led transition from 1991 to 1993 was a critical turning point in Cambodia's political development because it was the first real attempt to establish a multi-party democracy in the post-Khmer Rouge era. UNTAC played a key role in facilitating Cambodia's transition to a democratic system, drafting the 1993 Constitution which established Cambodia as a constitutional monarchy with multi-party elections and a parliamentary system (Becker, 1998).

However, despite the formal establishment of democratic norms and institutions, the legacy of centralized power and political manipulation continued to undermine Cambodia's democratic transition. As Gray (2014) points out, the UNTAC mission's success in promoting elections was overshadowed by the difficulties in establishing long-term democratic norms. The political system remained heavily influenced by historical legacies, particularly the dominance of the CPP, which managed to retain significant control over the political system, despite the constitutional framework designed to promote pluralism and democracy #\_ftn7 .

## **4. Post-1993 Democratic Transition: Continuities and Changes**

### **4.1 Institutional Framework**

The 1993 Constitution of Cambodia adopted a parliamentary system which replaced the autocratic leadership that had controlled most of the nation's political development. The Constitution established a dual-chambered National Assembly and Senate together with separate powers between the executive and legislative and judicial branches. The new framework was intended to support democratic governance and political pluralism following Cambodia's violent past which included the Khmer Rouge genocide and subsequent Vietnamese-backed authoritarian rule #\_ftn8 .

The parliamentary system of Cambodia developed from historical power centralization during colonial times and the Khmer Rouge period. The 1993 Constitution presented democratic features but it maintained elements of centralized authority which characterized earlier political systems. According to Becker (1998) Cambodia adopted a constitutional monarchy with democratic elections but the political system retained its "highly centralized" nature which stemmed from colonial rule and subsequent authoritarian regimes. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) maintained its political dominance through democratic institutions because it originated from the Vietnamese-backed regime and the Khmer Rouge remnants (Chandler, 2004).

The centralization of power through history resulted in democratic institutions which failed to distribute genuine political power beyond the ruling party. According to Chandler (2004) the system permitted elites to keep control of political processes which reduced the democratic potential of institutions established in 1993. The parliamentary system of Cambodia exhibited democratic characteristics but its historical legacies maintained executive dominance which reduced legislative power and opposition influence.

### **4.2 Democratic Norms and Practices**

The 1993 transition period brought substantial progress towards establishing democratic

norms which include scheduled elections alongside political diversity and party system development. The 1993 elections became a historic moment because they introduced multi-party elections to Cambodia after many years of absence and UNTAC provided essential oversight for these elections which launched the country's formal democratic process (Becker, 1998). The development of democratic norms has proceeded at a slow pace while facing strong influence from Cambodia's historical background #\_ftn9 .

The political landscape continues to be controlled by the CPP which maintains its power through state structure dominance and holds regular elections. The political environment remains unbalanced because opposition parties face significant challenges in gaining substantial influence. According to Gray (2014) the continued centralization of power prevents democratic norms from being fully implemented in practice since elections serve to validate existing power structures instead of representing genuine pluralistic competition. The CPP maintains electoral control through resource and media restrictions which helps the party maintain its dominant position (Chandler, 2004).

The post-1993 period has maintained personalized rule which started under Sihanouk and intensified under the Khmer Rouge because essential leaders have maintained their grip on Cambodia's political system. Chandler (2004) explains that personal leadership remains the most significant historical legacy of Cambodia because it has created a political environment where power belongs to a few elite members instead of democratic institutions.

#### **4.3 Challenges to Democratization**

Multiple barriers to democratization exist in Cambodia because of the country's past authoritarian systems. The CPP has remained in power as the dominant political force after Cambodia adopted democratic institutions even though the CPP retains a strong control over the system. According to Chandler (2004), the historical period of authoritarianism established political norms that suppress opposition forces while allowing the ruling party to maintain unbalanced control of political competition.

Cambodian citizens lack faith in political institutions because of the violent Khmer Rouge era followed by the Vietnamese-backed regime. According to Gray (2014) the extensive violence combined with authoritarian rule has produced deep distrust toward government institutions. Democratic norms struggle to establish themselves because citizens remain fearful of participating in a political system which they believe is corrupt and controlled by elite groups.

The progressive weakening of opposition parties throughout the years serves as an additional obstacle to democratic consolidation in Cambodia. The CPP controls state resources alongside media platforms and security forces which establish an unfair competition environment for opposition parties to effectively oppose the ruling party#\_ftn10. The authoritarian political system has operated for so long that it has made opposition movements struggle to gain influence because it continues to restrict alternative viewpoints (Chandler, 2004). The political process remains challenging for opposition parties to participate effectively due to systemic obstacles despite the 1993 Constitution's establishment of political pluralism.

The process of democratization in Cambodia faces important obstacles due to historical factors which have concentrated power and generated institutional distrust while allowing the CPP to dominate political life. Political regimes from the past continue to influence the present political environment thus preventing democracy from becoming stable.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The research examines how historical events shaped Cambodia's democratic transition process through their impact on both parliamentary structures and democratic practices. The research demonstrates that Cambodia's political framework continues to experience lasting effects from its colonial past under France and its subsequent rule by the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese occupation. The political institutions developed during these historical periods

created lasting impacts which continue to affect the country through its post-1993 institutional reforms that maintained strong centralized power and weak institutional practices. The 1993 Constitution established Cambodia's parliamentary system to support democracy yet historical factors including powerful elite control and centralized power structures have maintained their influence over politics thus weakening democratic institutions.

The UNTAC period proved essential for democratic norm establishment through its work on the 1993 Constitution and its organization of Cambodia's inaugural multi-party elections. The development of democratic practices in Cambodia has shown gradual yet irregular progress since the establishment of democratic institutions. The Cambodian People's Party maintains its control over the government while opposition parties remain underpowered because of enduring authoritarian traditions. The political system's institutional framework from colonial and authoritarian times creates barriers for achieving complete democratic practices including party competition and political pluralism. The democratic transition in Cambodia faces ongoing hurdles which prevent the full establishment of democratic norms and practices.

The research delivers vital information which explains how societies transition to democracy after experiencing conflict. The Cambodian case illustrates how previous events shape political conditions while revealing the difficulties of establishing democratic stability in nations with enduring authoritarian legacies. Post-conflict nations must recognize that democratization demands both the development of democratic institutions and effective solutions to handle historical and cultural factors which impact governance and political participation.

Future research must explore new areas which will help us better understand Cambodia's democratic transition process. The research needs to study how international organizations and foreign governments and NGOs affect the democratization process after conflict. The study of external impacts on democratic practices would provide essential information for future political transformations. Research that compares post-conflict transitions in different countries would reveal shared obstacles and effective methods to overcome authoritarian legacies and build stronger democratic frameworks.

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