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The Making of Political Mavericks and Globalization:

A Quest for Symbolic Participatory Democracy in Cambodia

Dr. Leakhena Nou*

The widely circulated image of a sole Chinese student facing down a line of armored vehicles evokes the bravery of student activists as advocates of freedom and democracy against totalitarian governments. Surprisingly, little scholarly research on the socio-cognitive framework of the students’ role in promoting democracy exists, and even more limited research pertains to small Asian countries such as Cambodia. This exploratory study draws on meaningful discourses with Cambodian university students regarding their personal and public determinants in the forceful promotion of democracy. Essentially, this paper attempts to lay the foundations for a political theory of student collective action as influenced by the

* Professor Nou presented this paper at the February 2007 International Law Weekend-West Conference held at Santa Clara University. Leakhena Nou is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at California State University at Long Beach. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the subjects themselves who voluntarily participated in the study despite personal risk. Second, I want to thank Professors Michael Mend, Bandana Purkayastha, and Paul DuongTran for their constructive comments, but also to acknowledge that all opinions expressed in the paper are my own, and that I am solely responsible for any errors that it may contain. Third, I want to thank my student assistant MeeHee Yang whose hard work facilitated the success of this study and who devoted countless hours to the literature review.
multifaceted Cambodian milieu.

I. Introduction

Cambodia in the twenty-first century is a transformed society marked by Angkorean legacies, the tragedy and pervasive violence of the Khmer Rouge regime, and chronic episodes of war and devastation with no political assurance for its citizens. Cambodia is challenged to mourn the senseless slaughter of millions of its citizens. The will of its people to overcome social, cultural, economic, environmental, political, and psychological difficulties in periods of socio-historical transition allows us to determine the extent to which globalization affects national rehabilitation and the re-establishment of a civil society.

The politicization of internationally promoted concepts (e.g., democracy, sovereignty, and the people’s will) has been a problem in contemporary Cambodian politics since at least the late 1990s. In the 1998 national elections, opposition parties such as the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and, more specifically, the Royalist Front Uni National Pour Cambodge Independent (FUNCINPEC) and Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), ridiculed the electoral process and created tension between international and local Cambodian politics. Cambodian oppositional politicians deliberately manipulated democratic values and tenets for the purpose of race-based marketing—playing on the cultural overtones of a people’s conscience (i.e., rejection of Vietnamese influence as being patriotic and keeping with Khmer moral duty). These political marketing efforts failed in at least three ways: they did not achieve a functional electoral objective; they were not transmitted effectively from political leaders to voters; and they did not reflect a collective “will of the people.” Cambodia’s national transition from a war-torn environment to a civil society, characterized by procedural democracy, remains an unrealized goal. Transitional challenges and the suffering of Cambodian citizens largely hinge on leaders who “have refused to play by the democratic rules of the political game.”

Even amid ongoing instability, this small, rural, Buddhist Asian society is striving to regain its national identity within the shifting contexts of a global

3. Id.
market and international change. While social researchers and development workers focus on education, de-mining, rural development, and general healthcare needs of women and children in Cambodia, empirical studies of young adults have largely been overlooked. This focus on women and children is likely the result of a humanitarian urge to assist these vulnerable populations. Such studies are also popular because research funding is available for short-term, measurable research and/or development projects. While such projects are essential, overlooking the mobilization of university students in the political and nation-building processes in Cambodia may also prove critical to the country’s ultimate development.

The tasks associated with creating a civil Cambodia are daunting, especially for students. Several major challenges exist, as argued by Peou. First, in a weak state the politics of a ruler-survival are preeminent, and consequently violence often becomes the instrument for achieving personal security. Second, changing this phenomenon is difficult because power relationships among socioeconomic forces, particularly rulers, are asymmetrical. Third, often external actors or institutions unwittingly and negatively contribute to the dynamics of power relationships among socioeconomic factors, especially in a weak state such as Cambodia. Fourth and finally, the use of violence is usually counterproductive, self-destructive, and anti-democratic; Peou argues for all powerbrokers to share and play by democratic rules.

A sociological investigation to determine whether participatory democracy among contemporary Cambodian students is uniquely indigenous, or influenced by external forces, or because of appeal for Western democratic ideological consumerism, is as salient to understanding the political development of the country as is investigating the rise of the movements themselves. The mode by which democratic idealism translates into collective action is pertinent to analyses of national identity and nation-building in the post-Cold-War era. The concept of participatory democracy can be traced back to the post-Vietnam War student protests in the United States in the 1960’s at such places as University of California at Berkeley, Columbia University in New York, and Kent State University in Ohio.

5. Id. at 322-23.
6. Id.
Similarities and differences in students’ perceptions of democracy and globalization could help to provide answers to challenges involved in nation-building. The data from this study could be used for several purposes:

1. to assess the direction of social change caused by collective action in Cambodia
2. to compare how students conceptualize and strive for democracy in industrialized societies, non-industrialized societies, and transitioning societies such as Cambodia
3. to determine how global perceptions of democracy are developed and transmitted to Cambodia
4. to understand historical factors (e.g., the psycho-emotional legacies of the Khmer Rouge) and latent sociocultural practices (e.g., respecting gender roles and traditions) as they relate to economic and political structures, anomie, and social movements that produce (instead of result in) political mobilization and social change.

**Fundamental Research Questions**

Western ideologies and lifestyles have influenced Cambodia since the first national elections (held in 1993 and assisted by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia [UNTAC]). The international influence has continued with the presence of numerous international aid agencies, business investors, the internet and other technological advances, and media influences from elsewhere in Southeast Asia and around the globe. Although these influences have been significant, they have rarely been examined sociologically in research that considers the dynamic interaction between micro (i.e., personal social networks) and macro levels (i.e., political structures, cultural traditions, and periods of movements), and the impact of that interaction on movement behavior and collective identity. Crane points out that collective identity emerges from both micro and macro contexts of social movements, such that participants embedded within a social milieu understand their environment through interpersonal exchanges.8

In the past, Cambodian university students were largely disregarded by both local and foreign stakeholders and policy makers. The impact they will have in the future, or the extent to which they have contributed in the past to Cambodian

society, has seldom been systematically studied and documented.

This paper examines Cambodian student political behavior by considering indigenous conceptual views of democracy, underlying motivations and attitudes, and personal dispositions of the social activists in the broader social context of globalization, political mobilization, and theoretical perspectives of social movements. Empirical research and literature on collective student action in Cambodia are both rare, and this paper raises as many questions as it answers about the relationship between democracy and student political participation. The purpose of the current study is not to claim definitive conclusions, but instead to promote critical dialogue on this important subject.

Multiple questions guided the research and data collection. These included:

1. To what extent do Cambodian students understand models of democracy, and what concepts are encompassed by these models?
2. At what level have these Eurocentric democratic philosophies or values affected student activism and mobilization?
3. What criteria are being used to evaluate democracy, and are such criteria applicable to Khmer society?
4. Is greater emphasis being placed on the performance and working styles of the government, as opposed to its legitimacy?
5. Are students more concerned about the process of democracy, or the results of democracy?
6. To what extent are the cognitive frameworks of Cambodian students regarding democracy distorted by social factors in contemporary Cambodian society (e.g., international development aid workers and access to modern technology such as the internet as a medium for political organizing)?
7. Ultimately, to what extent do these political perceptions foster a sense of civic responsibility for shaping government policies and practices by asking government agencies for help in doing so?

The relationship between democracy and student political participation could be connected to a number of fundamental variables, including having fragile ethnocultural and national identities; lacking personal confidence and trust in civil society, political leaders, and macro-political structures; having fatalistic, karmic notions of one’s place in society; being afraid to challenge authorities; fearing personal and/or familial harm for being politically active; and manifesting certain personality traits (e.g., extroversion or introversion). This study uses these variables as a basis for investigating the propensity for contemporary collective
Cambodian student action.

II. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to systematically examine indigenous conceptions of participatory democracy and political development in the broader context of geopolitics, and to provide an outlet for the voices of Cambodian university students. A secondary purpose is to identify solutions to societal problems proposed by these students, and to foster a broader awareness of and participation in the democratic process among different stakeholders for democratic change (local Cambodians, Cambodian expatriates living overseas, and the international community).

The research itself raised significant questions about whether democracy has any relevance for Cambodia's future development, and whether a democratic political system can achieve maximum effectiveness within the context of individual and collective psychological trauma inflicted by the Khmer Rouge and decades of social, economic, and political instability. As the global community puts mounting pressure on Cambodian leadership for democratic transparency, what roles, if any, can and will Cambodian students play? Will they become compelling advocates for freedom and democracy? Or will they fall prey to corrupt practices when political parties offer scholarships and other incentives in exchange for their loyalty?

Defining Democracy

From an organizational perspective, this paper defines democracy as the pursuit of social justice in a system where people have equal access to resources and opportunities as guided by the rule of law. Based on a relative deprivation perspective, increasing numbers of Cambodian youth are discovering that they have been marginalized and are on an unequal ground as compared to other global citizens, particularly the youth in emerging nations.

The modernization of Cambodia, fueled by forces of globalization, could potentially spark Cambodian political student activism, similar to the 1950s Cambodian student group in Paris that objected to industrialization and dependency on the developed Western world.9 The ascribed powerlessness of

Cambodian citizens suffering from anomie prevents them from pursuing both personal and professional goals as a result of inadequate resources and opportunities, restricted alternatives, and a society that limits autonomy. Recalling Merton’s classic work on social structure and anomie, the insufficient availability of institutional resources (e.g., lack of skilled laborers, access to healthcare, and adequate living conditions) and opportunities (e.g., job/educational training) or rewards (e.g., employment and promotion) have caused stressful experiences and conditions for everyone in Cambodia’s unstructured society. As such, the consequences of anomie and deprivation are probable catalysts for social unrest and political mobilization of contemporary Cambodian students.

III. Legacies of the Cambodian Left and Political Student Activism

Cambodian students have long been active in the political life of Cambodia. From the time of the colonial French (1863-1953) through the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (under the leadership of Prince Sihanouk, 1955-1970) and the Khmer Republic (under the leadership General Lon Nol, 1970-1975), student collective activities have affected national policies and caused grave concern to the government, at least up to the point when a group of student activist leaders took control of the government themselves. This group was known as Democratic Kampuchea, or Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot (also known as Saloth Sar). These student leaders (particularly Saloth Sar, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim, and Hou Yuon) had studied in France on government scholarships in the 1950s. While in France, they developed leftist tendencies shaped by the French Communist Party and the political doctrines of Marx and Lenin. The intellectual excitement of Paris helped stimulate communist ideological development for student activists, and the lasting impressions were especially evident in Pol Pot and Ieng Sary.

Motivated by a strong sense of nationalism and leftist ideals, and operating under the auspices of the Khmer Students Association (KSA) in 1951, approximately 200 student activists began to organize a tightly disciplined party willing to use armed force to achieve revolution against the encroachment of Vietnamese control of Cambodia’s cultural identity, while at the same time challenging Sihanouk’s leadership by calling him the “strangler of infant
democracy.” Eventually, this student action led to the birth of the Khmer Rouge movement. French authorities closed down operations of KSA a year later, but Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan quickly established a new Marxist-orthodox group known as the Khmer Students’ Union. Ironically, these two student leaders were the most radical, as reflected in their doctoral dissertations, (which became central works to the Khmer Rouge), outlining basic policy tenets later adopted by Democratic Kampuchea and describing in basic terms what was to come in the Khmer Rouge genocide.

In his 1955 thesis, “[t]he Cambodian peasants and their prospects for modernization,” Hou Yuon challenged the conventional philosophy that urbanization and industrialization were required preludes to development. Similarly, in Khieu Samphan’s 1959 thesis, “Cambodia’s economy and industrial development,” borrowing from dependency theory, noted that self-reliance is key for a country to become sovereign by terminating its economic dependency on the developed world.

Once these student leaders returned to Cambodia in 1956, they continued their activities and organized the communist movement not as former Khmer Rouge leaders, but as Khmer Rouge leaders to be. They remained leaders of the movement until it collapsed. (The Khmer Rouge leadership, the Democratic Kampuchea, was forcibly removed from power by the 1979 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. The remaining members of the Khmer Rouge were dismantled by their own internal divisions and purges, and Pol Pot was ultimately captured by his own military commander, Ta Mok.)

During the approximately ninety years of French rule, only three high schools existed in Cambodia: Lycée Sisowath, Ecole Normale, and Collège Norodom (a girls’ school). At that time, young students and Buddhist monks often demonstrated against the French rule, against government debauchery and corruption, and against the treatment of students by the government. The series

13. Interview with Anonymous Source (Feb. 5, 2007); FED. RESEARCH DIV., LIBRARY OF CONG., supra note 9 (highlighting the “strangler of infant democracy” and Khmer Students Association).
14. Id.
15. Id.
16. FED. RESEARCH DIV., LIBRARY OF CONG., supra note 9.
17. Id.
18. Interview with Anonymous Source (Feb. 5, 2007).
19. Id.
20. Id.
21. Id.
of demonstrations by students helped launch the national movement for independence from the French.\textsuperscript{22}

Under Prince Sihanouk’s leadership, students became the all-important intellectual elite and militant youth, trained to fight the French if necessary. Shortly thereafter, this movement bifurcated dangerously to the right (the Yuvan) and to the left (eventually becoming the Khmer Rouge).\textsuperscript{23}

The demise of Prince Sihanouk can be blamed on (or credited to) student demonstrations in front of the National Assembly, in which angry students demanded the quick return of the Prince (from France) and the immediate evacuation of Khmer territory by the Vietcong/North Vietnamese who occupied eastern and northeastern Cambodia at that time.\textsuperscript{24} When the Prince refused to return and called everyone in Cambodia “traitors” and “imperialists’ lackey running dogs,” a motion for impeachment was presented and won at the National Assembly.\textsuperscript{25} This vote has been labeled a \textit{coup d’etat} to this day.

But it was during the rule of the Khmer Republic (led by Lon Nol), particularly during the period from January 19 to March 16, 1974,\textsuperscript{26} that students played an even more significant role in affecting government policy. During this three-month period, radical student opposition to, and protests of, the corruption and incompetence in the Lon Nol regime and poor living conditions in Cambodia repeatedly forced the Cabinet to renege on its decisions.\textsuperscript{27} During a generalized demonstration and capture of five student leaders, the minister of education (Keo Sangkim) and his advisor (Thach Chea) were seized by students, marched to a Lycée, sequestered in a classroom, and shot at point-blank range a few hours later.\textsuperscript{28} In spite of this violence, which could have been initiated or at least encouraged by Khmer Rouge elements, the Government did \textit{not} react against the students for fear of generating an unmanageable popular upheaval while the country was fighting the Khmer Rouge.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{22} Id.
\textsuperscript{23} Id.
\textsuperscript{24} Id.
\textsuperscript{25} Id.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{See generally} Donald Kirk, \textit{Cambodia 1974: Governments on Trial}, 15 \textit{Asian Surv.} 53, 53-60 (1975) (detailing early Cambodian student demonstrations).
\textsuperscript{27} Id.
\textsuperscript{28} Id.; Interview with Anonymous Source (Feb. 5, 2007).
\textsuperscript{29} Interview with Anonymous Source (Feb. 5, 2007).
IV. Perspectives on Student Political Activism: Deprivation and Resource Mobilization

This examination of democracy in terms of deprivation coincides with early studies of collective action and social movements, which noted that deprivation is a catalyst for political unrest. Deprivation and resource mobilization are used as two theoretical frameworks for understanding grievances and ascribed powerlessness felt by the student respondents in this study. Deprivation becomes absolute when basic human needs for food, shelter, and security are not met. Individuals and/or social groups who experience absolute deprivation have the least to lose and the most to gain by altering the economic and social status quo. Likewise, Cambodian students, with no real power in their lives yet, have little to lose and everything to gain when they consider altering existing economic, political, and social order through collective action with the goal of securing a better future for themselves and their families.

Resource mobilization theorists assert that deprivation and associated grievances are relatively constant. However, the rise or downfall of collective action largely depends on whether groups either possess or have access to resources that provide them with elements essential for mobilization.

Wilkes recommends that deprivation and resources should be treated as complementary explanations of collective action, and that timing and intensity should also be considered. The timing for collective action among Cambodian university students is especially critical now, as Cambodia is forced to compete for resources in a global economy and confront the looming reality of a controversial hybrid Khmer Rouge Tribunal. The larger Cambodian society expects educated Cambodian youth to lead the country in a new direction with political reforms characterized by integrity and equality for all its citizens. Accordingly, political mobilization is likely to occur as Cambodian students perceive themselves as socially disadvantaged who are constantly worried about their future careers (as argued by the deprivation theorists), while at the same time they need to acquire social and financial capital (as argued by the resource mobilization theorists) in order to challenge the status quo.

31. Id.
32. Id.
33. Id.
34. Id. at 570.
Cambodia’s evolution from an agricultural society to a modern state also surely influences the timing of protests, opportunities, and social resources for active political participation among Khmer students. Poor economic and unstable sociopolitical conditions are contributing deprivation factors preventing many youths from excelling in their professions (due to lack of professional options available) and thereby leading to increased political action and protest.

V. Contextualizing Democracy and Student Activism

The social and political dispositions among Cambodian university students must be contextualized and examined as they relate to a general pattern of student activism and movements. Often, the underlying reasons behind student movements speak to larger questions such as national unity or independence, perceived equality or inequality within and among nations, and the legitimacy of authority. As the results of this study will show, these larger issues are extremely relevant in the search for a national identity so common among Cambodian students. The questions, then, are how do we account for Cambodian political student activism and propensities, and what are the motivating factors characterizing Cambodian university students’ pursuit for a political voice and democratic legitimacy?

To understand the relationship between political authorities and political recipients, researchers need to recognize university students as important social agents capable of becoming a strong political force. Because students frequently have technical skills, resources, and free time to be active in politics, and because they are especially easy to recruit, they can potentially become a strong political force. For example, the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan sparked the 1989-1990 Columbian student movement. Galan was a stern opponent of drug trafficking and a popular contender to win the 1990 elections. The student movement in Columbia played a critical role in encouraging that nation’s assembly to draft a new national constitution to proclaim their rejection of all types of violence, to uphold the protection of human rights, and demand social reforms to perceived political failures.

35. Altbach, supra note 7.
36. Id.
38. Id.
39. Id.
Generally speaking, promotion of democracy can be accomplished in several ways: class struggle, economic development, political mobilization, and educational awareness. The relevance and potential effectiveness of various democratic models must be examined on a case-by-case basis. In Indonesia, for example, university students focused on raising social consciousness to eliminate class struggle and increase political awareness among the general population.

In order to understand student collective action for political change, it is useful first to ask why such students are not active participants in the existing political structures. To answer this underlying question, researchers need to explore the social constraints (e.g., inefficient technology for communication purposes) and social processes under varying conditions (e.g., intergenerational and cultural value differences) within a given society.

VI. Characterizing Asian Student Activism

Western research has played a critical role in the expansion of political activism literature. The 1960s and early 1970s were a time of extensive studies on activism, yet this research was conducted primarily in industrialized countries and few studies applied to emerging democratic Asian nations. Today, student activism in developing Asian nations remains largely under-investigated in spite of the importance attached to education and student politics throughout the region.

The fight for democracy by Asian university students has been noted throughout recent history. The ideals of socialism, Marxism, and bipartisanship historically have encouraged students to act as strong advocates in the fight for freedom. In this sense, student movements have helped shape social and political structures in various countries. When violence and activism becomes part of worldwide political discourse, social scientists frequently discover students leading the struggle for national liberation and unification, such as in the 1989 student pro-democracy movement in Beijing. Student movements in such Southeast Asian

40. Altbach, supra note 7.
42. See generally Josef Silverstein, Students in Southeast Asian Politics, 49 PAC. AFF. 189 (1976); Justus M. van der Kroef, Patterns of Political Opposition in Southeast Asia, 51 PAC. AFF. 620, 620-38 (1978); Frank A. Pinner, Students – A Marginal Elite in Politics, 395 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 127, 127-38 (1971) (highlighting the importance of students in Asian politics).
43. Id.
44. Id.
45. See Dingxin Zhao, State-Society Relations and the Discourses and Activities of the 1989
countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have also played critical roles in overthrowing unjust governments and have stimulated social changes, including university students in other parts of East Asia and South Asia, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Nepal and India. For example, the collective political actions of Indonesian university students led to the resignation of the Suharto regime in 1998, demonstrating that a strong collective action can effect social change. Research evidence indicated a strong relationship exists between political protests and democratization in Asia, eventually leading to political liberalization.

Investigating the historical roots of contemporary collective behavior and activism is essential for unraveling complexities that link the past and present and thereby inform our analysis of how student movements change societies. Most theoretical paradigms are primarily focused on industrialized nations, and most social scientists conducting these studies are not indigenous to the communities they are studying. Therefore, even well-intentioned researchers can easily overlook subtleties or cultural variations prevalent in Asian student activism.

Asian countries vary widely both culturally and politically, leaving little opportunity for useful generalizations. However, the political activism of Asian students generally can be traced back to influences of nationalism, radicalism, and modern ideologies. These events usually transpire in the university environment and student communities, and then trickle down to other social groups within the society. The protective university life and environment exposes students to new ideas and ideologies while simultaneously releasing them temporarily from societal obligations, which provides them with the opportunity to form decisive and more independent views on political issues. Zhao found that, in the 1989 student movement, the ecology of university campuses in Beijing nurtured close-knit student networks while directly exposing all Beijing students to a collective-action environment. The ecological conditions found on Beijing university

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46. Hedman, supra note 41, at 947.
47. Id.
50. Id.
51. Id.
53. Id.
campuses not only sustained participation in the student movement, but facilitated student mobilization, which established the patterned behaviors of the movement.\textsuperscript{54} Zhao also indicated that the density and homogeneity of a population both enhance group solidarity.\textsuperscript{55}

There is a trend among some Asian nations to achieve independence and democracy by using the democratic political system as a framework for social and economic development. Cambodian university students, like students in other nations, should not be overlooked as important actors in social change and democracy movements. From 1993-1995 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, students at the Institute of Technology and other universities led a series of escalating demonstrations to protest the wide use of French as the instructional language in higher education; the students argued that French should be replaced by English.\textsuperscript{56} In another incident, on February 26, 2003, in reaction to the threats that Thailand posed to their ethno-cultural identity, students and other Cambodians engaged in anti-Thai demonstrations, mainly in Phnom Penh.\textsuperscript{57} This protest was supposedly prompted by the rumor that a Thai actress had claimed Angkor Wat belonged to Thailand, triggering anger and violence against Thai citizens and property.\textsuperscript{58}

These recent Cambodian student-related events illustrate that Cambodian students are a real political force, despite political resistance to meeting the demands of student activists. However, such students have acquired the necessary linguistic and technical skills to compete in the modern global economy, and could therefore be key agents of constructive political change in Cambodia’s future.

\textsuperscript{54} Id. at 1518.
\textsuperscript{55} Id.
\textsuperscript{56} Thomas Clayton, \textit{Language Choice in a Nation under Transition: The Struggle Between English and French in Cambodia}, 1 LANGUAGE POL’Y 3, 3-25 (2002). Discussions by phone on February 25, 2007 with Cambodian university students who were in Cambodia during 1993-1995 disclosed that the student demonstrations on this language tension extended well beyond 1995 and at least up until the 1998 elections.
\textsuperscript{58} Id.
VII. Cambodia's Recent Political Development

Recent National Elections

The 1990s Peace Agreement, signed in Paris on October 23, 1991,59 set the foundation for Cambodia's transition from a communist state to liberal democracy and the free market. The agreement involved four Cambodian political parties: the State of Cambodia (SOC), the Royalist Front Uni National Pour Cambodge Independent (FUNCINPEC), the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and the Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge).60 The four signatories agreed that the “Constitution will state that Cambodia will follow a system of liberal democracy, on the basis of pluralism” and, furthermore, that the Constitution “will provide for periodic and genuine elections,” “for the right to vote and to be elected by universal suffrage,” and “for voting by secret ballot.”61 And finally, the Constitution ensures that “electoral procedures [will] provide a full and fair opportunity to organize and participate in the electoral process.”62

These quotes highlight the significance of the electoral process in modern Cambodian politics, which is especially noteworthy considering that the society has never experienced a participatory representative political process such as democracy. The local and international communities will closely watch the political parties to see whether they hold true to their ideological commitments and promises and translate those promises into actual political behavior.

As part of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, the May 1993 national elections—sponsored by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC)—re-introduced civil society in Cambodia.63 For the first time in Cambodian history, approximately 90% of the Cambodian electorate voted, reinforcing the acceptance of political participation and representation.64 The 1993 elections were a contest between twenty political parties in which the FUNCINPEC party won 45% of the vote.65 However, FUNCINPEC had to share power with the Cambodian People's

60. Peou, supra note 1.
61. Id.
62. Id.
64. Id. at 44.
65. Id. at 43.
Party (CPP) even though they had only 38% of the vote.\footnote{Id.} These two parties combined to form the Royal Government of Cambodia.\footnote{Id.} The CPP’s use of violence to maintain power led to a tense and fragile coalition government (Provisional National Government in Cambodia – PNGC) that resulted in the CPP overthrowing FUNCINPEC from the government in a military coup in July 1997.\footnote{Human Rights Watch, The Run-Up to Cambodia’s 2003 National Assembly Election - Political Expression and Freedom of Assembly under Assault (2003), http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/cambodia/cambodia061203.pdf (last visited March 31, 2008).} This factional fighting in 1997 terminated the first coalition government.\footnote{Id.}

According to the Human Rights Watch briefing report, violence is a common occurrence in Cambodian elections.\footnote{Id.} For instance, in the run-up to the 1993 elections, at least one hundred opposition party supporters were killed.\footnote{Id.}

Following the 1993 elections, Cambodia held its second national election on July 26, 1998.\footnote{Peou, supra note 1.} There were high hopes that a second national election would provide political and national stability. As expected by election observers, the CPP won the election.\footnote{Id.} Their victory can be explained by two major factors: they controlled all of the important government and state institutions, and they created a restrictive atmosphere of fear in the civil society.\footnote{Id.} To promote fear and to intimidate voters, the CPP reactivated its cell system used in the 1993 elections, in which party agents were active in applying pressure to recruit groups of families to join the party and vote for the CPP.\footnote{Id.} The CPP intimidated voters by means such as having voters drink holy water in Buddhist oath-taking ceremonies to ensure promised votes for the CPP.\footnote{Id.} This tactic, along with other forms of intimidation, raised serious doubts as to the legitimacy and secrecy of the ballots. Intense violence was also a problem in the run-up to the 1998 elections, as was the CPP’s strong grip of the electoral administration, military, and police, and the limitations they placed on media access for other political parties.\footnote{Id.}

Human rights observers objected to the electoral process that resulted in post-
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election demonstrations and violence in the capital city of Phnom Penh; at least 26 people were found dead as a result of this violence. The three months of political fallout after the elections forced FUNCINPEC to take a subordinate role in forming another coalition government with the CPP in November 1998. Several international election observers and opposition parties have noted that the success of the CPP can be attributed to the failure of the National Election Committee to respond to complaints of political violence and intimidation prior to the 1998 election.

Downie points out that the 1998 election was not free and fair based on three factors: the incumbent regime’s failure to separate state and party (the CPP in this case) and the executive and judicial branches of government; the lack of oversight to establish rule of law and respect for human rights; and the rejection of political competition. Downie further suggests that the next election (in 2003) would be doomed for failure as well until these three factors were rectified. The International Republican Institute echoed the same charges of social injustice, indicating that the July 26 election did not comply with standards of democratic elections, and the National Democratic Institute found the elections suffering from systemic problems with the electoral process and the credibility of the National Election Committee and Constitutional Council to be partial.

On July 27, 2003, Cambodia held its third national election. This election, like the two preceding it, was not free from violence and political unrest. Non-liberal and anti-democratic sentiments for the 1998 and 2003 political elections were also shared by other scholars. In the run-up to the 2003 election, several high-level political assassinations became front-page headlines. One of the more well-known killings was that of Om Radsady on February 18, 2003, who at the time of his death was a senior advisor to the leader of FUNCINPEC, Prince

78. Id.
79. Id.
80. Id.
82. Id.
83. Id. at 52.
85. Hughes, supra note 2; See Ronald Bruce St. John, Democracy in Cambodia - One Decade, US$5 Billion Later: What Went Wrong?, 27 Contemp. Southeast Asia 406, 406-28 (2005); McCargo, supra note 84, at 98-112.
86. Human Rights Watch, supra note 68.
Norodom Ranariddh. Following the death of Radsady was that of a senior monk, the Venerable Sam Bun Thoeun.

These high-profile killings were also connected to widespread threats and murders (e.g., the murder of twelve activists not associated with the CPP prior to the February 2002 commune elections). Human rights observers found lack of access to media outlets prevented opposition parties from promoting their campaign messages, thus limiting political choices for the voters. Fraught with inconsistencies, the election outcome did not turn out as people expected. This caused alarm about its legitimacy, and resulted in a year of political negotiations before the CPP was declared the final winner and a coalition government was formed.

In his discussion of the formation of the new government, Ronald Bruce St. John best summarizes the illegitimacy of the CPP: “Hun Sen in total control of all forms of security, no one in the foreseeable future looked to be in a position to challenge him. The creation of the coalition government, after a year-long battle in which opponents had failed to oust him displayed for all to see Hun Sen’s growing inability to tolerate any form of dissent. The formation of the coalition thus marked not a benchmark on the road to greater democracy in Cambodia, but instead a detour in the direction of a one-party state.” McCargo draws the same conclusion about problems associated with the hollowness of Cambodia’s elections: “What happened under UNTAC in 1993 was the beginning of a pattern in which Hun Sen used the outward show of electioneering to legitimize the status quo rather than let power change hands. At best, election results had a marginal impact on the relative clout of the CPP’s rivals for power.”

Research Juxtaposed with Threats to Freedom and Democracy

The current study was conducted with full knowledge of heightened concerns for the well-being of student respondents, including myself. Serious assessments were made to determine whether sociopolitical conditions would allow for students to engage freely in the study. In this study, I sought to create a private space in which they would be able to express experiences with democratic development and
political participation in an atmosphere free from intimidation. Despite efforts to ensure safety, respondents and I were sometimes threatened and/or suspiciously followed.

Data collection took place in 1999, shortly after the 1998 national elections. As research got underway, several respondents reported being followed and questioned by strangers as to why they were involved in the study. As a threat for participation in this study, one male student reported that when traveling on his motorcycle several secret agents of the Cambodian government, also on motorcycles, tried to crush him alongside a city wall. Although the student survived this frightening incident, he did not inform me of this incident until three years later, because he feared further retaliation from the government for reporting it. This event illustrates the fact that intimidation is a very real obstacle to students’ searches for a peaceful democracy in contemporary Cambodia.

VIII. Methodology

Data collection for this study was conducted in 1999 concurrently with a larger research project conducted between 1997 and 2000 that examined the psychosocial adjustment and well-being of university, college, and technical students in Cambodia. The student sample (N=93) for this study was collected separately from my larger stress study of Cambodian students (N=1257). The 1998 national elections sparked my interest in exploring student notions of democracy and collective action tendencies.

To protect the confidentiality and safety of student respondents, execution of this study was held at a youth center in an undisclosed location in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, separate from university facilities. The study took place in November 1999, and used a combination of methods including several focus group discussions and surveys on perceptions of and experiences with political participation and democracy. Shortly after data collection for this study began, for data comparison purposes, the anti-Thai riots in 2003 called for the recruitment of university students who took part in demonstrations. Recruitment of the 2003 student group sample was accomplished for relevancy purposes to examine

94. For more information on research respondents, methodology, and findings see generally Leakhena M. Nou, Stress, Social Support, Coping, and Psychosocial Adjustment of Khmer University, College, and Technical Students in Modern Cambodia: A Sociological Study (Aug. 2002) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawai‘i at Manoa) (on file with author) (presenting a larger study focusing on the psychosocial adjustment and well-being of Cambodian students in contemporary Cambodia for which data was collected from 1997-2000).
whether political perceptions and behaviors had changed over time.

**General Profile of Student Respondents**

The age range of students was between eighteen and twenty-five years old, of both genders and from wealthy urban and poor agricultural backgrounds. They were recruited through a non-random, snowball sampling procedure from various private and public higher education institutions in Cambodia. The students majored in diverse fields including Biology, Literature, Geography, Agriculture, Business Administration, Economics, Computer Science, Law, and Hotel/Tourism Management. Specific demographic information is intentionally omitted to protect the identity of respondents.

**Sample 1: Public-school respondents**

The first core group of students (N=14) were in their first or second year of college at one of several public higher learning institutions in Cambodia. They consisted of nine females and five males and were asked to participate in an open discussion and survey session. They were recruited by a voluntary snowball sampling basis and had mostly poor economic backgrounds. The specific gender and academic break-down of the student body was as follows: three females majored in biology, one female in literature, one female in sociology, and four females in geography; two males majored in geography, and three males in agriculture.

**Sample 2: Private-school respondents**

A group of third- and fourth-year university students (N=64) from wealthier, more elite family backgrounds and who attended a private university made up the second cohort. They mainly majored in economics, business management, computer science, law and tourism, which they reported as fields not only financially lucrative but also well-respected in society. The anonymous procedure for recruitment of this student cohort did not allow for collection of specific profile descriptions.

**Sample 3: 2003 student respondents**

At an undisclosed site, I conducted an informal semi-structured focus group discussion with university students in Cambodia on February 12, 2003, to elicit their perspectives and experiences triggering the anti-Thai riots the preceding month. Fifteen participants included male and female students from public and
private higher learning institutions in Cambodia; all participants were twenty-two years old. There was no attempt to collect in-depth data on the demographics of students in order to encourage a high participation rate. In addition, lingering sociopolitical hostilities at the time required anonymity in order to protect the identities of participants.

Procedure for Samples 1 and 2

Two sets of research questionnaires were specifically designed to assess student perceptions of democracy and political participation. The data collection was completed through two separate survey sessions: one session was conducted anonymously with students in a private university, where students were not required to provide information on their personal demographics; and the other allowed the student group to share information on their backgrounds. Students at the private institution were given the anonymous survey as a method of ensuring that family identity and position would not inhibit participation.

The first questionnaire was given to students from public schools using an open-ended and qualitative approach. I facilitated the survey session so that it allowed for extensive data collection focusing on two main areas for discussion: understanding of democracy, and determining the impact of democracy on their personal lives. This procedure fostered a comfortable atmosphere in which students could share personal views in focus group discussions, while also completing survey questions in written form.

The second set of questions was choice-limited (using a Likert-scale/checklist format95) with a few open-ended items. It was used to assess students’ interpretations of the political process. For instance, one item asked respondents to describe the overall political situation in Cambodia ranging from flexible to fragile to totalitarianism; another item asked respondents to describe Cambodian political doctrine as either socialism, socialism and liberalism, liberalism, multi-party liberalism, or to state that they had "no opinion" on the topic. A local Cambodian law school graduate with strong knowledge of the subject matter helped to design the second questionnaire. A field analysis with a targeted group of law students served as the pretest social group for the survey instrument. Respondents who participated in the pretest of the second questionnaire felt that these survey items were sufficient and appropriate for the subject under study.

IX. Results

In order to protect the identity of students, analysis for the study was anonymous and confidential. Generally speaking, students are quite cynical in their political viewpoints about the government's role in improving Cambodia's socioeconomic and political conditions. In many ways, they believe that government officials lack Khmer nationalism and are incompetent, because of their limited technical ability and resources, to guide Cambodia into the next millennium. A few respondents noted that Cambodia would develop faster if students were given more opportunities to participate actively in national policy-making.

They also reported that traditions of corruption and nepotism have been in effect for too long and need to end. If such behaviors continue to be tolerated, Cambodia is at risk of another civil outbreak. Overall, students reported that Cambodia must change its political system to include more welfare and educational programs to better serve the general population, and that its political leaders need to be less self-righteous and greedy. They also asserted that the Cambodian government has done little to promote social programs to benefit the well-being of people and has failed in its attempts to gain respect and trust of the people.

Although various socioeconomic and political actors in Cambodia have benefited the Cambodian people and nation, negative effects linger. For instance, Cambodian students prefer to view foreign television programs rather than local Khmer programs, because they felt that actors portrayed in non-Khmer programs exhibited superior Western values and lifestyles. The students specifically favor Western thinking and lifestyles, and intentionally place less regard on Khmer values.

Apparently, the students' opinion of Western culture as superior to Khmer culture gives them an advantage in enhancing their personal, career, and political opportunities—opportunities that otherwise might never be granted to them in Khmer society. They will use these opportunities not only to advance their own lives but the lives of their families as well; thus, using their limited control to cope with Cambodia's uncertain sociopolitical conditions.

Students generally felt that they should be allowed to take active roles in Cambodia's social, cultural, economic, and political development process; in essence, they want to establish participatory democracy. Their desperate desire to be a part of the political system is so strong that they would be willing to manipulate social relations if necessary to achieve "social justice" (e.g., obtaining
equal access to resources and opportunities in society). Students sought out political opportunities by taking advantage of political elites as a way to facilitate political mobilization and realize their collective interests. It was reported that certain political parties attempted to buy the students' loyalty by providing them with scholarships and other personal amenities, such as housing and clothes. Students frequently agree to these "deals," while in other cases, they disguise their true political feelings as a means of securing immediate personal survival and for their families.

There is always a tendency for students to get whatever they can out of their relationship with political elites. Sometimes, this survival strategy goes well beyond professional and political relationships and into personal relationships, leading to friendships and sexual relations. As one recent law graduate stated: "When it comes to my views about Cambodian society, I have to think first about myself and my family, and voicing concerns about societal issues is a waste of my time. If the government does not care, why should I?"

One student stated that "basic survival" for himself and his family is the primary reason for being politically active. This response was also confirmed by other student participants. Moreover, students reported that pretending to support political elites is an effective way to gain both social and financial benefits, such as establishing social connections for future employment with the government. Thus, outside observers cannot assume that student collective action acts independently from their very real need to survive the currently poor social, cultural, economic, and political conditions.

X. Mapping Contextual Frameworks for Data Analysis

To understand social change, three general contextual frameworks are used to analyze propensities for collective action and political mobilization of Cambodian university students. These frameworks include relative deprivation, status strains, and micro-structural mobilization (also known as resource mobilization). These three theoretical frameworks are used to map results in terms of three general themes: general views of democracy, assessing the impact of democracy on participants' personal lives, and assessing the political process of Cambodian politics. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn below. Relevant findings from the research conducted in 1999 with groups 1 and 2, as well as those from a third cohort in 2003, will be shown to support the general themes discussed in this paper. Readers wishing greater detail on the original research should refer to my other published works and my dissertation.
Relative deprivation refers to the gap (often significant) between people’s value expectations and outcomes or, stated more simply, what people expect as compared to what they get. Relative deprivation is often determined in association with reference or comparison groups against which people measure themselves. Relative deprivation is a comparison process that occurs when individuals/groups find that their situation does not match that of others in similar situations. Deprivation can easily lead to grievances (cultural, political, and/or economic) among the group, and thus be the force for political mobilization.

Structural status strains/inconsistencies are likely to occur when people feel threatened by social change, especially when their position in society is threatened. In the case of Cambodia, political elites within the government are less likely to support collective action that threatens their current positions of power. Similarly, the rising social status of university students with Western academic training and technical skills could threaten job opportunities normally taken advantage of by foreign expatriates.

Microstructural mobilization (also referred to as resource mobilization) relates to people’s personal characteristics, such as the interpersonal networks and organizational affiliations that propel individuals into activism and participation in political movements.

XI. General Views of Democracy

The first two tables below include summarized results from the first group of students (N=14), those who attended public colleges or universities. These summaries focus on two major areas: the students’ general views of democracy, and their thoughts on the impact it has on their lives, as they pertain to the three theoretical perspectives of relative deprivation, structural status strains, and

97. Wilkes, supra note 30.
98. Id.; McCarthy & Zald, supra note 95.
General Views of Democracy in Terms of Relative Deprivation

- They believed that the main principle behind democracy is a legal system that allows for the legislative, executive, and judicial process to take place. As such, ultimately the power of law should serve people and it must be applied equally to all segments of society.

- When asked to what extent they think democracy exists in present-day Cambodia, twelve students (four men and eight women) claimed that it does. There are still limitations to what it can offer. The following reasons support their understanding of limited democracy in Cambodia:
  - a majority of the population does not have access to higher education,
  - abuse of power is pervasive in the society,
  - and control of power remains in the hands of an elite government circle.

The constant pressure by the international community acts as the vehicle for reinforcing democracy in Cambodia.

- While a majority of the fourteen students believe that democracy exists in Cambodia, two students (one male and one female) disagreed. These students defined democracy as a form of "political participation" in the decision-making of Cambodian national welfare. By not being engaged in participatory democracy, students develop negative sentiments toward the Cambodian government and are likely to disagree with national policies.

- When asked about actions taken to involve students in the 1998 election, students said that certain political parties bribed student leaders and university faculty with campaigning in exchange for promises of future employment in the government. Sadly, the students later discovered that they were cheated because those promises were broken after the election. More importantly, they reported feelings of personal integrity being sold for money and power. This experience caused students to feel distrust towards the government. When asked if they think there has been an improvement in student participation since the 1998 election, some reported that greater efforts should be made to allow freedom of expression of political views without threat and involvement in the democratic process by working with the government. A majority of the students expressed great skepticism in the government's ability to include them in any type of political process or elections.
On a more personal level, two students believe that democracy has affected them and their families as it causes tension in family relationships. This is because they do not know quite how to react to societal changes. For example, parents are afraid that their children might be at risk for harm when they participate in democratic demonstrations. On the other hand, twelve students believe that democracy has given them more power to make choices in life-making decisions (e.g., study abroad, employment, freedom of speech). These students described democracy as a form of decision-making. They also mentioned that communication has been enhanced among family members since the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, which has made Cambodia a more open society to the international community. The students feel that improved communication between students and their parents has allowed them to speak more freely about various personal and political issues in the household.

When asked what kinds of students would participate in the democratic process, a majority of the respondents said anyone interested in promoting social-economic and political as well as other changes (e.g., environmental). Participation is not restricted to students of any particular fields of study, but is open to everyone wanting to change Khmer society. There were mixed feelings among students about gender differences with regard to perceptions of democracy. Two male agriculture students (ages 21 and 22) indicated that female students have limited opportunities to explore the concept of democracy because they are restrained by the traditional chhap srey moral code for women’s behavioral conduct, and therefore are not allowed to participate in societal issues. One interesting comment offered by a male geography student (23 years old) and a female biology student (19 years old) indicated that gender differences do exist in the students’ perception of democracy, because Khmer society places more value on males in general than females. Another group of two males and six females (ages 18-23) believes that males and females do not differ in their perceptions of democracy.

The students reported that they were often portrayed by the media as ignorant
and irrational in their pursuit of democracy. Because students were able to think and act independently in their freedom of choice to vote, others, including the media, tended to label the students as easily bought by particular political parties. Oftentimes crowds of students were viewed in the media as a threat to the government and to the 1998 election. A majority of students who participated in this discussion saw their role in the 1998 election as being a model for the rest of the society to follow. They felt that they had a neutral responsibility to educate the larger society about the importance of choosing the right leader to lead Cambodia towards democracy and social justice. One male agricultural student, however, felt that his involvement in the 1998 election was ineffective and not beneficial to the society because the government had a tendency to undermine the role of students in democratic development.

General Views of Democracy in Terms of Resource Mobilization

- Democracy is defined as freedom, including the following: speaking and writing freely, free decision without force, living freely, equality among women and men, and power granted to the people. Democracy in this sense can be defined as freedom of "rights."
- The channels of communication or media through which democracy has influenced the students include the following:
  - lecture halls,
  - workshops/conferences,
  - research projects,
  - the 1993 and 1998 election campaigns,
  - reading books related to theories of democracy, and
  - the rapid introduction of international/foreign aid and/or institutions in Cambodia.
- The students were asked what steps could have been taken to encourage student participation in the 1998 election. Several alternatives were cited to achieve more student support. The majority of the students felt that, in order to ensure a free and fair election, more education about democracy in the school system is needed. Further, the government must provide a secured atmosphere for secret ballot voting. More organization and management with
the voting process is needed. The students asserted that they must have courage to demand a free and fair election through such activities as student demonstrations or organized protests against the government. Using the media as the vehicle for fair campaigning by all parties participating in the election, policies and procedures must be in place to allow people to object to corruption or unfair practices in the election without fear of harm. Less optimistic about student participation in the election, two female students (one in biology and one in sociology) felt that no improvements or steps could ever be possible because government officials will always retain power for their own interests over the national interest.

- When asked about what effect the 1998 election has had on Khmer society, the following results were cited: corruption has somewhat been discouraged, sex trafficking is less visibly obvious, and violence is not as prevalent. On the other hand, a few students said that not much change has taken place in Khmer society since most of the political leaders elected in the 1998 election are the same individuals who won their positions in the 1993 election.

- Another question was asked about what kinds of people are necessary to enhance democracy. The students believe that leaders who possess characteristics of patience, integrity or honesty, high levels of education, selflessness, are hard working, not corrupt in practice and morality, and not easily pressured by others are necessary to promote effective democracy. Interestingly, the students also believed that it is important to establish good relations with the U.S. government as a means to ensure promotion of democracy in Cambodia.

XII. Assessing the Impact of Democracy on Cambodian Students’ Lives

The next series of tables focus on a set of items asking the students from the first cohort to cite examples of how democracy has influenced their lives. Many had a hard time answering this question. They reported power struggles between different political stakeholders as a hindrance to democracy that could lead to anarchy and not benefit the society as a whole. Students reported that Cambodia presently operates under a “pseudo-superficial” democracy with no legitimate basis. They cited several reasons for this, including the lack of all of the following: government accountability, a free press, effective judiciaries, and the rule of law in
the civil society. They do not believe that true democracy will be achieved anytime soon in Cambodia as a result of an unresponsive government bureaucracy.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Assessing the Impact of Democracy in Terms of Relative Deprivation</th>
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<tr>
<td>• With regard to whether students believe that people are judged more favorably based on external factors (e.g., wealth) rather than intrinsic factors (e.g., leadership skills), a majority of them reported that an &quot;unjust&quot; society often rewards negative behaviors over merit and gives the false impression that people who possess material wealth are legitimately successful and powerful. Students believe that people who have status or means of material wealth are granted more opportunities and resources to excel in Cambodian society, even though the attainment of it may be through illegitimate means. This class-based system slows the promotion of a just and fair society. The law is blind to those with less power and money. No matter what situation arises, the students claim that the law always favors the wealthy and powerful, despite the fact the poorer person may be more truthful. Ultimately, the students believe that class-based inequality affects the political development process in Cambodia.</td>
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<td>• Based on their perception of class-based inequality, the students were asked about how this perception affected democracy and their role as university students. All of the students expressed low morale and poor concentration in their studies due to lack of jobs and educational opportunities after graduation. Some have considered giving up on their studies. According to students, the gap between the rich and poor is so great and the system so often works in favor of the rich that it seems senseless to pursue an education that, in the long run, does not offer them a bright future.</td>
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Assessing the Impact of Democracy in Terms of Structural Status Strains/inconsistencies

- When asked how the international community has brought harm to Cambodian democracy, a few students reported that sometimes members of the international community are too quick to judge the Cambodian government without fully knowing the contextual situation in Cambodia. And in some cases, they exacerbate the situation by siding with one particular party over another, causing more tension in the Cambodian democratic pursuit.

- When asked if they were advocates of democracy, and if so, how to go about implementing democracy, a majority of the students said that they were strong advocates of democracy. They would implement democracy by spreading ideals of democracy to others, protesting if necessary, and ultimately by casting their votes for a government that shares their democratic views.

- A more sensitive question was raised when the students were asked whether they thought democracy was the best form of government. There was a split response among the students. While some were in favor of it, others seemed unsure. To those who were uncertain about the validity of democracy, I asked what alternative form of government would be good for Cambodia. One overarching thought prevailed among students: should an alternative government come to power, more emphasis needed to be placed on societal well-being as opposed to personal nepotism.

- Asked whether they viewed democracy as a vehicle for progress in Cambodian society, a majority of the students believed that progress is not possible without a democratic government. Some students believed that even under communism progress is possible with the right resources and technology.
Assessing the Impact of Democracy in Terms of Resource Mobilization

- When asked what advantages democracy can offer Cambodia, the following ideas were cited:
  - Cambodia would develop faster economically,
  - peace would prevail in the country,
  - human rights would be respected, and
  - more freedom would exist in general.
- A further question was asked: To what extent has the international community contributed to the making of a Cambodian democracy? A majority of the students viewed the international community as playing several roles in the promotion of democracy in Cambodia, including:
  - teachers of democratic doctrines;
  - caregivers who could provide financial, human, technical, and material resources;
  - defenders of human rights;
  - catalysts for applying pressure on the government to act responsibly for the people and to promote true democracy; and
  - gatekeepers who could ensure that democracy becomes a reality in Cambodia.
- When asked how education, particularly higher education, has influenced students' views of Cambodian society, the majority believed that education serves as a useful framework by which to judge whether the government is doing its job to promote social justice or not. They also believed that with education one is able to freely and rationally criticize the government without fear.
- When asked how they were influenced by democracy, they responded that the opportunity to participate in various workshops and conferences related to democracy served as the foundation of their knowledge of democracy. A majority of the students cited several sources contributing to their knowledge about democracy:
  - interaction with development workers and teachers,
  - views offered by opposing political parties,
  - newspaper, television, radio (e.g., Voice of America),
• conferences and workshops,
• human rights organizations, and
• election propaganda.

When asked how they would go about promoting "democracy" if they were a government official, the following suggestions were provided:
• create centers where people could go to freely submit complaints against the government,
• create community-outreach educational programs on democracy, and
• have educational training on democracy in the school system from the primary to university level.

The students were asked who serves as role models for promoting democracy in their lives. The answers included:
• a strong leader informed about democracy,
• teachers, parents, relatives,
• human rights organizations, lawyers, and student leaders.

The students were then asked how these role models go about promoting democracy. Several activities were cited including:
• short training courses on democracy,
• using the media to educate people on the principles of democracy (e.g., television, newspaper, magazines, and radio), and
• recruiting students to join political functions by way of conferences and workshops.

When asked what type of government they favored, all students replied that they preferred a government elected by the people despite previous responses that questioned the validity of democracy. The students were then asked what relevance democracy has in the lives of students regarding their career choices. All of the students said that democracy affects their personal lives and career choices in that it determines their future chances for a better life – more employment opportunities, money, and stability in the society. The students further stated that tougher laws related to labor and laws against corruption should be top priorities in Cambodia’s development process. However, students noted that democracy will be difficult to achieve in Cambodia so long as corruption by government officials continues as their thirst for power and money overshadows the lives and needs of the general population. The students believe that the rule of law, as opposed to power-hungry government officials, should rule the country in order to benefit Cambodian society as a whole.
XIII. Assessing the Political Process of Cambodian Politics

The following table contains summarized responses from the second cohort of students (N=64). These students attend a private university, and their responses focused on their assessment of the political process in Cambodia. The president of the university asked that the students' identities be kept private to ensure a high participation response rate. The students were asked to respond to a series of Likert-scale questions as well as to open-ended items in order to determine their current understanding of the political situation in Cambodia. The survey consisted of ten questions, ranging from “What is the political state of Cambodia?” to the open-ended item, “What are the advantages and disadvantages of Cambodian politics?”

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<th>Assessment of the Political Process in Terms of General Understanding</th>
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<td>• One question was designed to discover whether students understood the three branches of law. Twenty-five students (39%) said that the executive branch influences both legislative and judicial branches. Ten students (16%) said that the legislative branch determines the actions of the executive and judicial branches. Seven students (11%) said that the three branches (executive, legislative and judicial) complement each other. Sixteen students (25%) said that the three branches are separate from each other. One student (2%) said that the government is a combination of the executive branch influencing both the legislative and judicial branches and the legislative branch influencing the executive and judicial branches. The remaining five students (7%) did not answer the question.</td>
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<td>• The next question asked which political doctrine the Cambodian government promotes. Thirty-three students (51%) chose “multi-party liberalism,” twenty-one students (33%) chose “socialism and liberalism,” seven students (11%) chose “liberalism,” two students (3%) chose “communism and socialism,” and one student (2%) had “no idea.”</td>
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### Assessment of the Political Process in Terms of Relative Deprivation

- A question was asked about the students’ perception of the political situation in contemporary Cambodia. Eight students (13%) said it is totalitarianism. Their reasons for this conclusion were twofold. First, in theory, democracy sounds good, but the government fails to implement it effectively. Second, violence against protestors is usually imposed on individuals who object to governmental practices. Twenty-four students (37%) described Cambodia’s political situation as fragile. Several reasons were cited including:
  - partisan culture is reinforced in the society,
  - corruption has become the norm in society,
  - low salaries are given to civil workers,
  - there is interference by neighboring countries,
  - an unstable social climate after the 1998 elections has caused people to fear the unknown future of Cambodia and Cambodians, and
  - free-style executions are imposed on those who object to certain political parties.
- Finally, the remaining thirty-two students (50%) described the political situation in Cambodia as flexible. The first reason cited for this description relates to these students’ belief that democratic models and policies of other countries easily influence the current government, while failing to create an independent Khmer democratic model to serve the national interest. Second, there is an unclear overlap between socialism, a multi-party system, and the implementation of unspecific policies (e.g., social welfare and education).
- When asked if they think that the Cambodian government is able to provide a free and fair democracy, twenty-two students (34%) said “No,” eighteen students (28%) said “Yes,” twenty-three students (36%) said “Somewhat,” and one student (2%) had “no idea.”
- When asked whether they think Cambodia is a state of law, thirty-eight students (59%) said “No,” twenty-four students (38%) said “Yes,” and two students (3%) had “no idea.”
- When asked whether they think the Cambodian government is successful in promoting its political platform, only one student (2%) out of sixty-four said “Yes.” Twenty-one students (32%) said “No,” and forty-two students (66%) said “some or to a certain extent.”
Assessment of the Political Process in Terms of Structural Status

Strains/Inconsistencies

- When asked to describe the political state of Cambodia, ten students answered that Cambodia is an independent state and that France no longer colonizes Cambodia. Eighteen students described Cambodia as a subordinate state with several reasons cited including:
  - poor management of the state,
  - ineffective laws,
  - existence of social inequality,
  - lack of freedom of speech,
  - corruption, and the pressure and influence of foreign countries and policies in Cambodia.

- The remaining twenty-six students described Cambodia as both an independent and subordinate state because it operates under a corrupt and partisan system, with the branches of government failing to work independently in favor of the people. Poverty has been described as a contributing factor to the state being in this subordinate condition.

The next three items were intentionally open-ended to elicit more information about the students’ understanding of democracy and its role in Khmer society.
Open-Ended Item 1: Assessing the Track Record of the Cambodian Government's Political Development

- The first question asks what students think of the current Cambodian government. Thirty-eight students (59%) think negatively about the current Cambodian government, citing several reasons including:
  - the present government is unstable or unpredictable and operates under a corrupt and selfish system,
  - there is no justice in the court system,
  - the government does not pay enough attention to territorial or immigration issues,
  - the government often uses violence as a form of conflict resolution,
  - the government does not take responsibility for serving its people and society,
  - national security is weak,
  - there is always chaos in the city,
  - the government is not neutral in its political ideologies,
  - the government does not do enough international trading,
  - the government as a whole is incompetent to lead the country in the right direction, and
  - those who have connections often monopolize power.
- On the other hand, seventeen students (27%) think positively about the Cambodian government. Several reasons were cited including:
  - there have been some improvements in the economy and policy reforms, but corruption is still rampant;
  - the infrastructure and economic opportunities are better than before;
  - there is more consciousness for the government to take the law seriously;
  - deforestation has become an issue of contentious debate, whereas it was ignored before; and
  - finally, people can begin to hope for a better future.
- Only nine students (14%) responded that they had “no idea” about the question.
Open-Ended Item 2: Assessment of Cambodian Politics in Terms of Relative Deprivation (Disadvantages) and Resource Mobilization (Advantages)

<table>
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<th>Disadvantages (Relative Deprivation Perspective)</th>
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<td>- More than 60% of the students believe that there are more disadvantages than advantages to the current state of Cambodian politics. Several reasons were cited for this view including:</td>
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<td>- there is anarchy in the society;</td>
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<td>- those who have money and connections monopolize power;</td>
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<td>- immigration law is not enforced;</td>
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<td>- unsanctioned corruption, elimination of natural resources, and deforestation have become norms and serious problems in the society;</td>
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<td>- government personnel are incompetent and lack technical skills to lead the country;</td>
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<td>- the government pays no attention to people’s standard of living;</td>
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<td>- national security does not exist;</td>
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<td>- lack of job opportunities and/or unemployment is high;</td>
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<td>- human rights are not respected;</td>
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<td>- partisan practices still occur;</td>
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<td>- dictatorship-style ruling practices exist;</td>
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<td>- very little socioeconomic and political change has occurred in the society;</td>
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<td>- a faster rate of development needs to take place; and</td>
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<td>- lack of opportunities for higher education and career training remains a concern.</td>
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<th>Advantages (Resource Mobilization Perspective)</th>
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<td>- Approximately 40% of the students cited the following advantageous aspects of Cambodian politics:</td>
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<td>- people live in less fear of crime and kidnapping;</td>
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<td>- the implementation of development projects in various parts of the country has been successful;</td>
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<td>- a free market economy has been introduced;</td>
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roads, pagodas, and schools have been built;
there is more freedom to travel around the country without fear;
the educational system has been revamped; violence is somewhat
suppressed or discouraged;
social policies have been created to reduce poverty and crime;
Cambodia has been accepted into the Association of Southeast Asian
Nations (ASEAN);
international relations have been established and developed; and
in general people are allowed to make more choices about their own
lives.

Assessment of the Political Process in Terms of Resource
Mobilization Open-Ended Item 3: Proposals to Improve
Socioeconomic and Political Conditions in Cambodia

This question asked students what steps they would take as a government
official to improve the socioeconomic and political conditions in Cambodia.
Half of the students (50%) said that they would put the national interests of the
country ahead of their own interests. The national interests of the country
included the development of different programs that would focus on security,
education, social welfare programs, the economy, improving living standards,
human resources, employment opportunities, rural/agricultural development,
educational programs dedicated to democratic values, strengthening the
tourism industry, and developing close relationships with the international
community. The students considered the development of agriculture and
tourism as two essential priorities that would improve poor living conditions
in Cambodia. The other half (50%) had “no idea” how to go about improving
current conditions in Cambodia.

Findings from the 2003 focus groups (N=15) indicated similar patterns of
discontent with the poor state. When asked if they thought Cambodia had changed
since the 1998 elections, many students cited (as examples) lingering corruption
contributing to poverty; lack of human rights protection; weak national security;
human trafficking; poor educational system; lack of established international
investors; and lack of implementation of law/democracy. Many scholars cited the
corrupt practices of political stakeholders as a persistent problem undermining democracy in Cambodia and Asian democracies more generally.\textsuperscript{101}

A further question asked who was, or what factors were, behind the 2003 anti-Thai riots; students responded that three governments—Cambodian, Thai, and Vietnamese—were responsible. Several factors were attributed to the Cambodian government: the CPP wanted to gain popularity and support for the 2008 elections; the government was using the media to discourage support for the opposition and cast blame on opposition parties in order to attract more supporters; the riots were part of a business strategy to create competition between phone companies and others; and the event was staged by the SRP to test whether the CPP could handle a national crisis. For the Thai government, several reasons were cited: to increase tourism in Thailand; to gain popularity for the Thai prime minister and attract investors to Thailand; to repatriate Khmer citizens in Thailand back to Cambodia; and to halt distribution of Khmer products from Cambodia to Thailand and not vice-versa. For the Vietnamese government, several reasons were cited: to increase the selling of Vietnamese products; to distract attention from the Cambodia-Vietnamese border; for Vietnam to appear as an advocate/friend for Cambodia’s fragile political state; and to make Vietnam appear more attractive as a tourist destination given Cambodia is no longer safe.

When asked what it means to be a Khmer in today’s Cambodia, student respondents reported that it meant to be associated with Angkor Wat, to be short-tempered, to be passive, and to speak Khmer.

\textbf{XIV. Discussion}

Discussions with multiple groups of Cambodian university students at different points in time provided valuable insights. The students indicated that the political system in Cambodia is dysfunctional and far from reaching full good governance and democracy. Collective action for students depends strongly on their ability to balance their personal and professional survival needs with the need to engage in deceptive behavior with political elites as a strategy to a secured future. Rapid national change brought on by globalization (e.g., the influences of Western media and culture) has seriously jeopardized the ethno-cultural identity of Cambodian

students, including the attitudes they hold towards Cambodian politics.

Evidence has shown that Cambodian students are willing to act collectively against the government if necessary in order to achieve democratic development. The conventional approach to political participation as passive bystanders has lost its appeal for Cambodian students, and they are increasingly willing to “act-out” their personal discontents and grievances. The student population welcomes conventional approaches to political participation, such as voting, but is more likely to engage in unconventional political actions while leading political protests. They use these approaches hoping to alleviate the strain created by the great disparity between the privileged few and the impoverished masses. Consequently, as this gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” widens, the more determined students become politically charged and motivated.

Goal-striving discrepancies are especially common under the current poor conditions in Cambodia. University students in this study reported that many of their goals, such as becoming professionals in their fields of study, are blocked by a lack of jobs after graduation (as argued by the deprivation theorists). Reports of goal-striving discrepancies by students found in today’s Cambodia are consistent with studies of the effect of deprivation on collective action and the types of deprivation endured (economic, professional, and educational). The uncertain, weak structure of the political environment in Cambodia naturally creates status anxieties for its civil society, and by extension, reinforces the indefinite future well-being of university students.

Understandably, frustrations grow in such circumstances, and opportunities arise for students to engage in collective action to advance their cause by energizing the participation of other social groups. University students will continue to find political opportunities to make their grievances heard; participating in this study is one example of such an opportunity. The symbolic meanings students give to their current, vulnerable reality as marginalized individuals without promise of a secured future and economic mobility are enough to worry political elites; in fact, such students are political mavericks who have the ability and, at times, the desire to cause social revolt.

Favoring the mavericks’ cause is the potential reality of a divided, hybrid Khmer Rouge Tribunal. The possibility of a divided Khmer Rouge Tribunal should be examined within the frameworks of the macro-societal context of Cambodia’s changing social, cultural, economic, environmental, and political

102. See Nou, supra note 94.
landscapes. It should also be connected to and compared with the Khmer student group in Paris in the 1950s—the same individuals who later became the leaders of the Khmer Rouge.

In their attempt to define their self-identity within Cambodian society and to raise moral consciousness affecting deprived and vulnerable groups within Cambodian society, Cambodian university students have become politically active and (in part) motivated by the impulses of social distinctiveness and popularity. The generational (and, to a certain extent, cultural) tensions created by Cambodian student activism aimed at traditional state-level politics will continue unless the widespread problem of inconsistent access to education and other key resources is addressed satisfactorily.

Undoubtedly, the structural disadvantages for Cambodian students create overwhelming challenges to attaining political power and executing collective action. Simpson and Macy argued that one of the major limitations students have as low-power actors is the ability to organize “bargaining supremacy” due to their limited personal, social, and political resources.\(^\text{103}\) This structural position affects not only bargaining power but also the ability of low-power actors to organize against an unequal bargaining power. They further noted that collective action among low-power actors is facilitated by identification with others who are structurally disadvantaged.\(^\text{104}\)

**XV. Directions for Future Research**

To fully understand the political behavior of Cambodian students and their quest for democratic development, scholars are urged to examine all potentially relevant interactions between personal characteristics (e.g., extroversion, introversion, conservatism, radicalism) and social position (e.g., social status, gender). The following are suggested questions for future investigation:

1. How will the evolution of Cambodian universities as either forums for learning or profit-driven institutions affect the political ideologies of, and opportunities for, Cambodian students?
2. To what degree are Cambodian students patterning their political behavior on historical and/or contemporary knowledge, and how does this knowledge relate to their life experiences?
3. What roles if any Khmer behavior and characteristics (e.g.,

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104. Id.
intransigence; power, class, status, and rank; corruption; loyalty and allegiance to leaders; passivity and conservatism; honor, “face,” and dignity; spiritual beliefs; and psychological well-being) control or undermine the political will for Cambodians?\textsuperscript{105}

4. To what degree do the daily survival needs of Cambodian students compromise their pursuit of democratic objectives?

5. Is it possible that the uniqueness of the Cambodian socio-structural context of student political activism and behavior relates to the disparity of education, communication, and other related technical skills possessed by students and government personnel? (Cambodia’s current leaders have only minimal professional qualifications, while university students possess much greater access to information. Cambodian political leaders often lack professional training in conflict resolution, and resort to force to resolve social problems that threaten their ego-identity. This in turn discourages the participation of young-adult Cambodians in the political process.)

XV. Conclusion

This study has provided a valuable look at the multifaceted issues informing student collective political action in contemporary Cambodia. It has raised compelling questions for future research more than it has provided exhaustive answers about democracy and political participation of Cambodian university students. Nevertheless, the meaningful insights freely expressed by Cambodia’s political mavericks in this study demonstrate hopeful evidence of a sense of civic responsibility to advance the collective national identity and eradicate social struggle. This research clearly reflects the resiliency of Cambodian students and their ability not only to survive, but to thrive, in a highly controlled, authoritarian, uncertain milieu as they strategically deceive political elites for personal gain and survival.

Compared to student activists in other Southeast Asian countries, Cambodian students are structurally disadvantaged in their ability to create political change, because of the perception held by various social actors that the very groups they are fighting against (current political leaders and government officials) hold the keys to the few avenues for professional and economic security. On the one hand,

the students challenge the current corrupt system, while on the other hand they perceive it as the only source of jobs and security. Weak socio-ecological conditions in Cambodia hinder the sustained growth of political movements and collective action.

The link between political and cultural movements in developing countries and the impact of Western intellectualism is frequently created in the university environment, where it influences student nationalism. Cambodia is no exception. Currently, modernization and globalization are influencing the ways in which Cambodian students absorb Western values and seek to form a collective identity that serves to reinforce political behaviors both directly and indirectly. The 1993-1995 student protests in Phnom Penh, against using French as the official language, illustrate the powerful influence of the United States, in particular; the students viewed English as a more practical language with higher market value for functioning in a global society. Having their grievances satisfied in a sense promoted nationalist thinking as they fulfilled their civic responsibility to speak for other structurally disadvantaged groups.

The functionalist explanation is especially relevant in the context of contemporary Cambodia, as the disparity between the rich and the poor increases, causing social stress for marginalized social groups, and leading them to demand social change. Functionalism is a school of thought based on the work of sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1919). From the functionalist perspective, society is a system made up of interdependent parts or units, each of which serves a critically important, particular purpose in helping to maintain the larger social system overall. Thus, collective action by Cambodian students will develop as the students work for social change. Such efforts will likely focus on securing social benefits for marginalized individuals, constructing effective social reforms, and gaining entry into the established structures of society (e.g., the higher levels of the political system).

In terms of macro-level explanations from a functionalist perspective, sociologists believe that collective behavior develops within the context of the breakdown of traditional society (often associated with rapid social change). Such collective behavior is associated with a number of factors, including a shared source of excitement by participants, stress, anxiety, tension, or frustration. The students, along with many other Cambodian citizens, are at particular risks for structural status strains. These strains occur because the students have firsthand experience with ambiguities and deprivation (e.g., political elites engaging in corruption that undermines effective social policies in education, health care, etc.).
many of which ultimately lead to social inequalities between the rich and the poor.

As one of the newest members and most economically and politically unstable countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Cambodian government is encouraged to actively build upon the will of its citizens to build a stronger national identity and create a Khmer model of peaceful democracy. It is my hope that this study will stimulate further exploration of contemporary student activism and evolving democratic societies, particularly in Southeast Asia. The mounting pressure for change from both within and outside the country will force the Cambodian government, sooner or later, to respond to representative democracy and collective action. This is especially true given the current backdrop of global market competition in the 21st century and an impending fragile Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

The Cambodian mavericks might well seize the breakdown in Khmer Rouge Tribunal procedures as a ripe time for constructing symbolic collective identity by crafting persuasive messages that could reach other structurally marginalized social groups and encourage them also to fight for social change and justice. If the Khmer Rouge is not brought to justice, the culture of impunity in Cambodia will continue, setting a dangerous precedent throughout the world. However, if the mavericks succeed in pushing forward the work of the tribunal, they could usher into Cambodia a representative democracy that reflects the will of its citizens, finding its expression in a systematic management of the affairs of society free from corruption and self-righteous greed.