



NATIONAL
UNIVERSITY OF
PUBLIC SERVICE

DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION SCIENCES

DISSERTATION

DEEPENING DEMOCRACY THROUGH POLITICAL DECENTRALIZATION: THE CASE OF CAMBODIA

Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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2018



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OVERVIEW

This “Thesis Book” is prepared in a summary format derived from the doctoral dissertation entitled “Deepening democracy through political decentralization: The case of Cambodia,” submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of doctor of philosophy at National University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary. The summary consists of the followings: Abstract, Research Problems, Research Propositions, Research Objectives, Research Methods, Findings, Conclusion, Research Contribution, and Implication for Future Research. Finally, this will end with the list of publications during the research study and curriculum vitae of the doctoral candidate.

ABSTRACT

Democracy is such a contested concept that has been continuously refined and redefined according to forms of the governing regimes across time and space. Theories of democratization explain different approaches and condition that democracy either prevail or derail. Political decentralization is arguably deepening democracy if appropriately designed; however, there are inconclusive accounts of such merit, and there is a need to be studied contextually. Situating Cambodia in a hegemonic electoral authoritarian state, I investigate whether or not political decentralization is deepening Cambodian democracy by analyzing four central propositions, and the findings are as the followings.

First, the policy linkage to democracy is low due to the lack of the effective mechanism to ensure public participation and debate rigorously; thus, the chance of public scrutiny, engagement, and support is not desirable. Second, the emergence of opposition politic is crucial to democracy; however, the opposition party in Cambodia has not yet exerted its fullest influences that can strengthen democracy. Third, the local representatives from both of ruling and opposition party have played a limited role in increasing citizen participation, improving accountability, and acting responsively. Finally, local citizens prove that they understand the basic concept of democracy but do not yet actively and

effectively take part in the democratic space, which enables them to have a considerable impact on the deepening democracy.

Despite all the challenges revealed in this study, more investigation shall be made to examine the role of the ruling party concerning the deepening democracy. Motivational factors to encourage local representatives and people to participate in governing should also be scrutinized. All in all, it is noted that deepening democracy is possible through political decentralization, yet delegating political power without resources to local government may hinder the effectiveness of the policy that is aimed to increase the responsiveness, improve accountability and encourage active citizen participation, which is the cornerstone to democracy.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS

The various scholarly literature describes the closed relationship between decentralization and democratic consolidation (Grindle, 2011; Öjendal & Lilja, 2009; Ribot, 2011). It is argued that if appropriately designed and with political will, decentralization does deepen democracy (Blunt & Turner, 2005; Faguet, Fox & Pöschl, 2015; Rondinelli, Nellis & Cheema, 1984;). In contrast, the empirical reviews provide inconclusive merit of decentralization policy outcomes (Eaton & Connerly, 2010; Oxhorn, 2004; Tresman, 2007; Wunsch, 2014) and need to be contextually assessed and examined for its sustainability (Smoke, 2015; White, 2011). Political decentralization is defined as a mechanism to increase citizen participation, enhancing people power and authority, to influence a political decision in making public policy, mobilizing resources, and bringing social benefit (Cheema & Roninelli, 2007). Through the political decentralization, there is a broader space for opposition politics and the opportunity to demand the public goods from the citizen, which are crucial to democratization. Moreover, there is a general agreement that the opposition party plays a very crucial role in democracy; however, the knowledge of the opposition party is under-theorized and attracts little attention (Garritzmann, 2017).

After the genocide and civil war for decades, Cambodia signed a peace deal in 1991 and enshrined “multi-party and liberal democracy” in the constitution. However, democracy in Cambodia is described as "illiberal" (McCarthy & Un, 2015, p. 1) and not yet consolidated (Un, 2004). A skeptic is predicting that Cambodia is moving toward authoritarianism (Un, 2013). I argue elsewhere that democracy in Cambodia is trapped in the political Foggy Zone coined by Andreas Schedler (Chandarin, 2016). It was claimed that Cambodian culture is not receptive to democracy (Ashley, 1998; Heder & Ledgerwood, 1995; St John, 1995; Roberts, 2001). Also, the election law in Cambodia encourages "upward accountability" to a political party rather than the citizen (Rusten et al. 2004, p. 5). Recent development in 2017 indicated that Cambodia a de facto one-party state although national and local elections are regularly done.

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

With the heuristic purpose to understand political decentralization and its relation to democracy in Cambodia, this study aims to discover how political decentralization has deepened democracy in Cambodia by analyzing the four propositions:

1. The policy of decentralization is closely linked to democracy.
2. With the given political space, the opposition party is influencing democracy.
3. Local elected representatives are crucial to democracy by being accountable and responsive to their local citizens. Moreover, they encourage active public participation in the decision-making process.
4. With the knowledge of democracy, local citizens actively engage and influence to the decision-making process in their community.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To answer the main research question, “How has political decentralization deepened democracy in Cambodia?” the study has to fulfill the following objectives:

1. The study seeks to understand the decentralization policy linkage to democracy by examining the policy discourse and issue framing, policy messages, public engagement and support, and accountability.
2. To the extent that opposition political influences to democracy, the study investigates the opposition party linkage to democracy by examining its campaign, participation, ideology, representativeness, and policy.
3. As the local elected representatives are crucial to facilitate and encourage democracy, the study explores to what extent the commune councilors are responsive and accountable for providing public services to citizens. Besides, the study investigates how the councilors encourage citizen participation in the decision-making process.
4. Finally, the study seeks to describe and explain the knowledge of democracy understood at the local level in order to determine if there are any significant differences between the commune governed by the opposition party and the ruling party.

RESEARCH METHODS

A mixed-method of qualitative and quantitative analysis approaches is used in this study. The study justifies its single case study in Cambodia with four observation sites to describe and explain how political decentralization has deepened democracy in Cambodia. It is appropriate, as this study does not intend to test hypotheses but to explore and explain whether or not political decentralization has deepened democracy in Cambodia.

The fieldwork of this study was undertaken from October 2016 to March 2017 in four communes in two different provinces in Cambodia. The qualitative approach to the study consists of both documents analysis and interviews with political leaders, local representatives, and local citizen. There was an extensive review of relevant policy documents and research reports related to decentralization in Cambodia. Besides, the inclusive interview with key opposition leaders: Mr. Kem Sokha, the CNRP president,

Mr. Eng Chhai Eang, the CNRP vice president, and Mr. Yem Pohnearith, the CNRP director of administration, and 22 (4 female) locally elected councils were made. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were also conducted face-to-face with the total of 368 (209 female) respondents. The interviews were not recorded because this would be intimidating to the local citizen, as discussing the political matter was sensitive during the study because of the coming local election in 2017. They were noted in comprehensive documents and transcribed into both of qualitative and quantitative data in order to analyze with MAXQDA12 and SPSS 20.

FINDINGS

1. The linkage of decentralization policy in Cambodia to democracy is found "low." From the policy perspective, there are attempts to introduce democratic governance through various legal frameworks; however, there is a lack of determination to put the effective mechanism in place. Policy discussion and debates are not rigorously and openly enough for public scrutiny. The policy messages that are embedded with the democratic concept are low as there is the inconsistency between the policy prescribed and statement of intentions to the real practices. There are also low public engagements and supports due to some structural challenges that generally derived from lack of firm commitment from the top level to the low capacity of the local level. The accountability linkage to democracy is also identified low as there has just been clear and concise policy framework but not yet sure about how it will be implemented with the local communes.
2. The viable opposition party (CNRP) has “moderate” influences to democracy in Cambodia. The electoral regulation provides CNRP to have much influence on the selection of the candidates; it dominated and entirely controlled the campaign process in the local election 2017. CNRP successfully mobilized people to vote in both at the national election in 2013 and local election in 2017 in a considerable percentage of voter turn out. There is a moderate linkage between the party to ideology. Also, the representative linkage has been identified as "low" as there are

challenges in term of being responsible and accountable. There was a little positive move when the party was trying to exert its leverage to reform specific institution, namely the electoral committee, yet there were many more that the party failed to influence. Finally, its 7-point policy platforms did have some considerable influences on the government performance.

3. The local councilors, both from the opposition and ruling party, play a very limited role in deepening democracy through encouraging people active participation in the planning process. Limited budget from the central government is identified as a barrier to encourage participation, as the demands from villagers cannot be solved, and, thus, limit the councilors' role to be adequately responsive. Information channel through the village and group chief is also a factor hindering active participation. Local infrastructures such as roads, dams, or channels are seen as services that shall be provided from the communes. There is also a limited understanding of citizen to engage in social activities. The councilors know how to be accountable by being transparent and intimately engaged with citizen; however, feedback from citizen suggests that the councilors do not act as what they know. The accountability mechanism has just been put in place by the government, and yet it may take time to implement effectively.
4. Majority of people relate democracy to civil liberties and citizen rights. When trying to find out what could be the explanation to the different definition defined by the citizen, it reveals that gender and marital status do not determine the differences, but there is a little association with age and education. The younger age (18-24) seems to relate the meaning of democracy to civil liberties and citizen rights. The councilors from the opposition party do not have any significant influences to the different knowledge of democracy across the study sites. It is found that the majority of people do not participate in the local meetings and this low percentage is observed in all communes. It seems that information is one of the factors encouraging people to participate since those who are informed are seen to participate although they do not share any ideas during the meeting. Naturally, they just come to listen. Thus, the role of the informant such as the village chief or group chief is essential. Generally, people see the benefit of the

local elections and changes through physical development such as roads, dams, and channels, but with little knowledge of their influential role to make a demand. However, there is no convincing evidence to support that citizens are more motivated to participate in communes where the chiefs are from the opposition party.

CONCLUSION

The overall aim of the study is to explore how political decentralization has deepened democracy in Cambodia. The purpose of this study is justified by the argument that deepening democracy is possible through political decentralization.

Some related critical questions were brought up to examine the claim by looking at the policy of decentralization, the role of opposition party, the elected local representatives and the democratic concepts shared by the local people, which are all necessary components to democracy. Without a doubt, democracy does happen in Cambodia through the introduction of decentralization.

First, the policy of decentralization opens avenues for people to elect their local representatives who have more understanding about the local needs and could respond to the needs effectively. This also generates another local institutions and mechanism which is more democratic in a sense that local citizens can communicate closer and their representative can respond faster at their local level than they never experienced it as Cambodia has long been a centralized state. Although the policy introduced in Cambodia currently is found low linkage to democracy, it is a better point to start, and it thus needs the commitment from all related stakeholders: the government, civil society, opposition party, and citizens.

Second, along with the election, there is a rise of opposition politics that create a situation where political parties compete against each other to serve their local citizens. The competition has more or less shaped the attitude of the authorities, as they are no longer

seeing themselves superior to the citizen. They have to be accountable and seek support from the citizen by promising or delivering better public services for the public good. This also reinvents how the political structure is set up at the local level. Usually, the ruling party controls tightly over their agents through the sole chief either at commune or village level. With the rise of other opposition party and competition for the legitimacy to lead, citizens define power to the political party. The political party, both of opposition and ruling, will need to be restructured to make sure that their party is more responsive and more accountable. Political discourse and education will grow, which may significantly transform the nature of politics that Cambodia used to experience from the past decades.

Thirdly, local representatives start to learn to be performing their active role in serving their people. They start to know what they would do in order to maintain or gain support and attract local participation, which can threaten their legitimacy to rule. Besides, they learn how to communicate with their local people if they cannot fulfill any demands.

Finally, it is clear that citizen benefits from the local elections as they experience changes within their community. They learn how to voice their concern and demand. Such interactivity will develop more understanding and trust between the local authority and citizen. This soon changes the political culture and shapes the political institution in Cambodia.

However, political decentralization in the form of power devolution that only prescribed in the legal forms but without granting financial decision to make like in Cambodia can be a challenging task. As what Cambodia is experiencing, the national level determines limited budget and local councilors cannot generate their fund, for example through local tax, to respond to their local demands in term of infrastructural developments; this threatens the motivation to serve as well as the motivation of people to participate as the study has found. It is hard to imagine how to be accountable and responsible if there is a lack of resources, which is the incentive for both local representatives and people.

All in all, although slowly progress, political decentralization does deepen democracy by giving political space to political party, introducing structural and administrative support to local representatives and citizen and encouraging citizen to take part in making a political decision. Both local councilors and citizen in Cambodia are getting slowly to understand their rights and the democratic process. If all goes well, even if it is slower, there will be a quiet revolution we cannot repudiate in Cambodian politics.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

This research contributes enormously to those who are interested in local politics and public administration in Cambodia. Besides this will enrich by contributing the Cambodian case to theories of democratization and decentralization. The study in this dissertation will strengthen the hypothesis that decentralization can deepen democracy regardless of geographical, cultural, and socio-economical factors if there is strong political will, not only by the incumbent, but also the opposition party in demanding the political space at the local level. Besides, the case is interactively heuristic approach to learning, which can be contributing to broader theoretical development for the Southeast Asian region that could academize the excessive literature that mostly relies on cases in Europe or Latin America.

IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the sample is statistically representing up to 90 percent of the whole population at the four-selected study sites, this cannot be overstated that it represents Cambodia. As a young democratic country, decentralization was just introduced to Cambodia in 2002 and had not been implementing very well due to many factors. These include but not limited to the capacity of the local councilors, the opposition party performance and the willingness of the government to fully implement the policy. There are possible hidden agenda to the success or failure of the democracy promoted by the policy of decentralization that this research may not be able to cover all aspects. Therefore, the conclusion may only initiate for further investigation and confirmation.

Whereas citizen participation in making a decision in their local context is limited, it is necessary to assess further the motivational factors that could increase the participation. This study finds that the inability to respond to citizen needs, due to the limited budget that the councilors have, hinder the active participation. Further research should also be done to the motivating factors for councilors to be more accountable and responsive to their citizen, and whether or not the budget increment is the answer to increase citizen participation.

The way in which communication is transferred through village chief or group chief shall be further investigated. There is a need to understand whether what can be done to improve the channel of communication between the elected councilors to the local citizen.

Political parties are the backbone of democracy; however, limited literature is found within Cambodian political context. Both of the ruling and opposition party commitment to democracy shall be the subject for further investigation.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

1. Title: Transitional Justice and Political Reconciliation in Cambodia
Year: 2018
Journal: Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Vol. 4, No. 1.
Available: <http://www.jihhrs.com/index.php/jihhrs/article/view/63>
Page: 31-68
2. Title: Opposition Party and Democracy in Cambodia
Year: 2017
Journal: International Journal of Education and Research, Vol. 5, No. 10.
Available at: <http://www.ijern.com/journal/2017/October-2017/10.pdf>
Page: 109-124
3. Title: Democracy and Decentralization
Year: 2017
Journal: UC Occasional Paper Series, Vol. 1, No. 2.
Available at:
http://uc.edu.kh/userfiles/image/2017/10.%20UCOPS%20Vol%201_Iss%202.pdf
Page: 113-136
4. Title: Transitional Justice in Cambodia: Whose goal to achieve?
Year: 2017
Journal: Jogelméleti Szemle 2017/3. szám
Available at: http://jesz.ajk.elte.hu/2017_3.pdf
Page: 2-14
5. Title: Public Administration Reform in Cambodia: PEST Analysis
Year: 2016
Journal: Jogelméleti Szemle 2016/3. szám
Available at http://jesz.ajk.elte.hu/2016_3.pdf
Page: 33-44

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Education

- 2014 – Present **National University of Public Service**, Budapest, Hungary
PhD student (Dissertation: Deepening democracy through political decentralization: The Case of Cambodia's case, Supervised by Prof. Tamás Kaiser, PhD).
- 2006 – 2008 **Yogyakarta State University**, Indonesia
Master's degree in Educational Management with an emphasis in Educational Management at Higher Education, Accountability in Education and Total Quality management (Thesis: The Management at Cambodian Higher Education: A Case Study on Management and Leadership at English Department, University of South-East Asia, Cambodia, supervised by Prof. Suyanto, Ed.D.)
- 2000 – 2004 **Royal University of Phnom Penh**, Cambodia
Bachelor of Education with emphasis on teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL).

Research Experience

- Aug. – Oct. **Free University of Berlin**, The Center for Global Politics
- 2018 Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Klaus Segbers
- Invited as a guest scholar to participate in the Political Science and International Relations Education Development in Southeast Asia Project
 - Participated in conferences and learned the development of political science and its research methodology

May – Jul. **German Institute for International and Security Affairs**
 2018 Supervisor: Dr. Felix Heiduk

- Invited as a visiting fellow in the Research Division Asia
- Participated in seminars aiming at strengthening policy analysis skill
- Published in peer-reviewed column “Cambodia: The Winner Takes It All.”

Work Experience

2008 – 2014 **University of Cambodia**

- Senior Lecturer at College of Education and Social Science

2011 – 2013 **School of Vision (Cambodia)**

- Founder and Self-employed as a school director

2008 – 2011 **International Cooperation Cambodia**

- Human Resources / Project Coordinator

2005 – 2006 **American Intercon Institute (Cambodia)**

- Headteacher and instructor of English

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