

## Southeast Asia

# ELITES VS. REFORM IN LAOS, CAMBODIA, AND VIETNAM

*Martin Gainsborough*

*Martin Gainsborough* is a reader in development politics in the School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies at the University of Bristol. His publications include *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* (2010) and *Changing Political Economy of Vietnam: The Case of Ho Chi Minh City* (2003).

Taken together, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos present something of a puzzle. While Vietnam and Laos have remained one-party Communist states, Cambodia underwent a democratic transition in 1993 under the supervision of the international community. Yet all three countries have ended up with remarkably similar politics characterized by a lack of commitment to liberal values. In seeking to explain this, we should weigh the importance of political culture and “money politics” while noting as well that civil society activism and spontaneous protest are becoming more common.

Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos are often grouped together for the purposes of analysis. There are some obvious reasons for this. All are former colonies of France—once known collectively as “French Indochina”—located next to one another on the Southeast Asian mainland. All witnessed the rise of communist parties to nationwide power in the mid-1970s. Also relevant is Vietnam’s ill-fated attempt during the Cold War to sustain a special leadership role in Indochina, incorporating Cambodia and Laos after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978. Since the Cold War’s end, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos have been grouped together because they are among Southeast Asia’s poorest states; because they are linked through what is known as the Greater Mekong Subregion; and because they are among the newest members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). All three have also seen fast-rising economic growth and falling poverty since the 1990s, and are viewed as undergoing a process of “reform” involving a shift from central planning to a market economy.

Yet Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos are independent sovereign states with different histories and precolonial influences. Each had a different experience under French colonial rule, and the character of the postcolonial state in each is different too, often in quite subtle ways. Nor can it be said that the three states have followed the same trajectory since the Cold War ended. Vietnam and Laos have seen no democratic transition and remain one-party communist states. Cambodia, by contrast, did experience such a transition (overseen by the international community) in 1993, though many of its democratic advances have since been reversed.

Furthermore, as the three have integrated more fully into both the economy of their Southeast Asian region and the global economy, their varying circumstances are causing them to respond in varying ways to external economic, political, and cultural forces. These circumstances include questions of size and location. Vietnam, with 86 million people, dwarfs Cambodia (with 15 million) and landlocked, mountainous Laos (the poorest and smallest of the three, with only 7 million). Vietnam's economy is also some eight times larger than Cambodia's and fifteen times larger than that of Laos. The three countries remain comparable but distinct, in short, with trajectories that do not and will not match.

Regional specialists are used to thinking of all three countries as having embraced—by virtue of a conscious elite decision—a “reformist” (market-oriented) national economic policy. Vietnam and Laos are usually thought to have done so in 1986, at respective national party congresses held that year by the ruling Communists. Vietnam adopted a policy called *doi moi* (which literally means “new change” but is usually translated as “renovation”), and Laos announced a “new economic mechanism” based on “new thinking.”<sup>1</sup> Cambodia is generally said to have more or less followed suit in 1989, after Vietnamese troops left.

In terms of what elites are said to have done, the general consensus is that in each case the changes have had a significant political as well as economic dimension, even if the latter looms larger than the former. This consensus, however, overemphasizes change, formal policy, and elite initiative while underrating the significance of economic and political continuity and the extent to which factors *other than* elite-led policy initiatives have shaped events in these three states.

Relevant here is the extent to which elites in all three countries have often merely formalized spontaneous, “bottom-up” initiatives or experiments, whether by officials, enterprise directors, city dwellers, or farmers. Generally speaking, elites prefer to seem as if they are in charge and will not admit that they are reacting rather than acting. Yet as has been said regarding the related case of China, any account that neglects the role of informal or unsanctioned initiatives is a “highly sanitised” one, which “distracts us from the real dynamics of the reform process.”<sup>2</sup> This is not to deny that elites have initiated changes, but only to plead for a balanced assessment that notes the role of the informal as well as the

formal, and considers continuity as well as change. Such balance, moreover, is just as important when weighing political change—even where it falls short of full-blown democratic transition—as when examining reforms to the economy.

### **The Limits of Formal Political Reform**

Within the bounds of their respective one-party regimes, Vietnam and Laos have taken similar steps to reform their political systems. Cambodia's trajectory has been different, though it has wound up in much the same place politically as its neighbors, despite having experienced a democratic transition in the early 1990s.

Although the reforms launched at the Sixth Communist Party Congress in Vietnam and the Fourth Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 1986 are often seen as being primarily economic, in both cases they had a clear political component. In Vietnam, the key policy statement from that year highlighted problems that included poor coordination between the Communist Party and the government and Party officials' tendencies to operate outside the law and ride roughshod over electoral procedures. This critique set in train formal moves by the Party to build a state "ruled by law," to strengthen the role of the National Assembly, and to clarify the relationship between the Party, the government, and the citizenry. These issues remain current: Exactly how the Party views the "rule of law" and the "correct" relationship between citizens and the state are open questions.

The reforms in Laos also focused on the rule of law, and included enactment of the country's first postcolonial constitution in 1991, along with an emphasis on strengthening the bureaucracy. In both countries, there was also a loosening up in relation to the social sphere through the "destalinisation of everyday life."<sup>3</sup> Restrictions on domestic and even foreign travel were eased; day-to-day surveillance became less pervasive and intense; and new media outlets were allowed to emerge along with informal associations and groups, including religious groups. Although none of this added up to a democratic transition in either Vietnam or Laos—Communist Party control remained and the security forces were still formidable—in both countries the atmosphere did become considerably freer.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as popular protests in Tiananmen Square, the tearing-down of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of communism across Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union sent shock waves across the world, debate broke out over the future of the Vietnamese and Laotian political systems. Much of the discussion went on behind the scenes in these closed regimes, however, so it is hard to know exactly what was said. Yet the basic verdict was clear. As the 1990s began, both Vietnam and Laos moved to silence what appeared to

be minority voices calling for political pluralism. In Laos, two former vice-ministers and a Justice Ministry official were jailed for allegedly plotting to overthrow the regime.<sup>4</sup> In Vietnam, a Politburo member was sacked prior to the Seventh National Party Congress in 1991, apparently because he advocated multiparty politics.

Reinforcing their opposition to democratic politics, both ruling parties issued statements decisively rejecting what they called “extreme liberal demands” (Vietnam) or “a multi-party system” (Laos).<sup>5</sup> Since then, neither party has budged. Both continue to talk about developing “democracy,” but by this they do not mean liberal democracy. Instead, they mean things such as widening the number of ruling-party members who are allowed a role in choosing the top leaders, raising the number of directly elected local-government posts, and ensuring that the Communist Party listens more attentively to state officials, legislators, and citizens.

Since the early 1990s, Vietnam and Laos have both opened their doors to a wide range of bilateral and multilateral donor organizations and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), receiving high levels of aid and technical assistance in the process. The donors are both Asian and Western. In Laos there is a heavy Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese presence. Vietnam’s big Asian donor is China, but the Chinese presence is carefully managed (the two countries fought a short but bitter border war in early 1979, and carried on armed frontier clashes until 1990). Western donors have worked with both the Vietnamese and Laotian governments on governance-related areas such as public-administration and legal-system reform, the fight against corruption, and civil society development. None of this, however, has had much effect on the two countries’ politics.

Cambodia’s trajectory has been somewhat different. Following the Vietnamese invasion in 1978 to oust the murderous Khmer Rouge, Cambodia was ruled by a Hanoi-backed regime led from 1985 by Prime Minister Hun Sen. During the 1980s, a civil war raged as a coalition of royalists and the Khmer Rouge battled the Hanoi-backed regime. Peace became possible only when Vietnam, for its own domestic political reasons, decided that it could no longer sustain its military presence in Cambodia. Following the peace accord (signed in Paris in 1991) came a major UN operation that culminated in the 1993 elections, contested by 19 parties.

In the short term at least, the UN had a major impact. Cambodia acquired some of the formal underpinnings of liberal constitutionalism, including a new basic law consistent with its tenets. There was also a surge in civil society activity, and more vocal and diverse media emerged as well. Yet this liberal flowering soon began to wither. Elections have continued to go forward at regular intervals, but the gains of the early 1990s have suffered steady reversal at the hands of Hun Sen and his rul-

ing Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which are determined to maintain a tight grip on power. The result has been the systematic emasculation of the political opposition, including the royalist party known as FUNCINPEC (the CPP's former coalition partner) and the Sam Rainsy Party. The government's critics in the media, trade unions, and civil society at large have often been bought off or silenced through a mixture of patronage, intimidation, violence, changes to electoral laws, and recourse to politically biased courts.<sup>6</sup>

In the most recent election, held in July 2008, the CPP captured 90 out of 123 seats, and for the first time since 1993 was able to form a government on its own. The CPP also controls 90 percent of all commune or local-government committees.<sup>7</sup> This is a remarkable transformation for a party that—as many tend to forget—finished second behind FUNCINPEC in the 1993 balloting.

Like its counterparts in Vietnam and Laos, the Cambodian government has permitted the international donor community to operate, working with it on a wide range of governance reforms since the 1990s. Again, donors are Asian as well as Western, with China and Vietnam predominating among the former. And as with Vietnam and Laos, the effect that outside donors have had on Cambodia's basic political direction has been distinctly limited.

## **The Formidable Forces of Continuity**

Why have these three neighboring countries—Cambodia after the interlude of the 1993 transition and the other two more or less continuously—hewed so firmly to a nondemocratic path? The answer may lie in the strikingly similar elite political cultures found in all three. Tracing this similarity to its origin lies beyond the scope of this essay,<sup>8</sup> but we can document the common characteristics that these political cultures share, and outline their effects.

At the heart of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian political cultures alike lie heavy doses of elitism and paternalism. Under their influence, cultural assumptions about the proper relationship between the state and its citizens, or between rulers and the ruled, contrast starkly with what is taken for granted in the West. In these Southeast Asian societies, there is a strong implicit belief that the goodwill and high moral capacity of those in authority—and not the impersonal checks and balances favored by the liberal tradition—should serve as the key restraints on power.<sup>9</sup> The relevance of this cultural mindset can also be glimpsed in the emphasis placed on family (or to be more precise, on who your parents are) in all three countries.

Taking political culture into account makes it easier to understand why all three ruling parties reject pluralism and feel deeply uneasy about civil society or indeed any form of organization that operates outside

state or ruling-party structures. In this respect, it is worth noting that regulations legalizing NGOs and their dealings have advanced only slowly and often with much controversy in all three states.

A focus on political culture also sheds light on the character of elections in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

---

***In many minds across these three societies, there exists a close connection between the holding of public office and the acquisition of private wealth.***

---

In each country, the powers that be treat voting less as a contest of alternatives than as a chance for the citizens to confirm the intrinsic merits of their leaders.<sup>10</sup> Thus in Vietnam and Laos the state seeks to control who is elected to parliament, and in Cambodia Hun Sen has moved as if by instinct to shut down any notion of elections as a serious contest.

Furthermore, giving political culture its due weight raises profound questions about what is going on when the ruling parties work with the international donor community in areas such as public-administration reform or anticorruption. The reforms that the donor community pushes typically involve institutional checks and balances that host-country elites view with deep ambivalence. Whatever donors think they are doing, the reality is that local elites either lack seriousness about instituting liberal reforms or insist on interpreting and applying them in nonliberal ways. Finally, a focus on political culture makes it easier to understand (although not to condone) the rulers' tendency to treat dissidents and other critics harshly. Rights, the rulers' thinking seems to run, derive from buying into this elite-centered, paternalistic mindset. No buy-in, therefore, means no rights.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to an unfriendly political culture, the other major obstacle that liberal politics faces in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos can be attributed to the rise of "money politics" and the resulting commercialization of the state. The conventional account of Southeast Asian reform associates it (whether implicitly or explicitly) with economic liberalization and the retreat of the state. But this is not what has happened. The reform years in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos have indeed seen marketization, but also a form of state advance rather than retreat as politicians, officials, and those with close ties to them have seized on their "insider" access to business opportunities associated with marketization and globalization in order to enrich themselves.

In Vietnam, this process was first documented in relation to the rise of new state business interests from the 1980s as those with political connections began to accumulate capital by engaging in market transactions even under central planning. In Laos, the commercialization of the state is evident in frequent references to politicians and relatives of politicians who are known to occupy the commanding heights of the

Laotian economy. In Cambodia, the process began in the late 1980s with the selling-off of state assets, particularly by the CPP, as Hun Sen sought to win friends and influence people in anticipation of changes to come in the political climate.

The characteristics of this “reform era” political economy are similar across Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. First, as has been suggested, political connections and relationships are key. These are necessary for political protection as well as accessing land, capital, and contracts, or obtaining (if not bypassing) needed permits. Conflicts of interest are common, with officials (often acting through friends or relatives) operating in sectors of the economy that they are charged with regulating. Speculation and profiteering based on inside information gained under color of public office are frequent as well. Land speculation—or, in Cambodia, outright land-grabbing—is ubiquitous in all three states, and has proved a well-greased path to instant riches for many an officeholder, particularly since land began to recover its status as a tradeable commodity toward the end of the 1980s.

In many minds across these three societies, there exists a close connection between the holding of public office and the acquisition of private wealth. As with the elitist political culture, we are here in the presence of a phenomenon that has deep historical roots, but which has also received fresh impetus from new circumstances—in this case, those associated with market-based economic reform. In Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos alike, public salaries are low but aspirants will pay dearly for office and the easy access to private gain that it offers. Thus a bribe offered to gain preferment appears to its payer as an investment that can be readily recouped with the rents and other opportunities that a well-placed bureaucrat can lay hands on.<sup>12</sup>

In all three countries, this political economy is having profound consequences for politics. Inequality is high, not only in terms of income but also in terms of concentrated land ownership. In Cambodia, for example, where the process of accumulation has been the most rapacious, a tenth of the populace owns almost two-thirds of the land, and the top tenth of that tenth—or 1 percent of all Cambodians—owns an estimated 20 to 30 percent. One out of every five rural households is landless, and the figure is climbing by two percentage points each year.<sup>13</sup> Business interests are exerting a growing influence on politics, sometimes to the point of state capture. Behind-the-scenes lobbying of government grows intense as businesses try to shape regulations in favorable ways. The ruling communist parties now allow businesspeople to join, and prominent figures from the private economy sit in parliament. Finally, the tightening bonds between government and business are prompting a state bias in favor of capital when commercial disputes arise, and are compounding the political elite’s instinctive feelings of hostility toward independent labor unions.

Finally, direct links run between the “reform era” political economy and the failure of liberal governance to make much headway. In the area of public-administration reform, long a mainstay of donor efforts across Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, attempts to winnow out unneeded bureaucracies continually fail to achieve overall reductions, as positions or offices eliminated here are replaced by new posts or bureaus over there. This often puzzles outsiders, but it makes perfect sense to anyone who understands how closely public officeholding and private moneymaking are linked in these societies. Closing down government departments or clarifying job descriptions strikes at the heart of the discretionary behavior on which officials depend to supplement their income, and hence must be subverted.

### **Spontaneous Protest and Civil Society**

As powerful as may be the forces of culture and interest that bar the way to liberal politics, they have not been able to prevent the emergence of new kinds of protest and citizen activism in communist-ruled South-east Asia. In the 1980s, popular protests, or indeed any forms of organization outside the ambit of the party-state, were extremely rare. This began to change during the 1990s. Although the regulatory environment governing civil society activism remains uncertain and restrictive, there has been no re-Stalinization of everyday life, and things have not stood still. Small-scale protests have become commonplace and larger ones are not unknown, as citizens take to the streets or camp outside government offices demanding redress of grievances.

In Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos alike, most protests have to do with land disputes or complaints about corruption. Yet Vietnamese Catholics have demonstrated for freedom of worship while citizens in Cambodia have protested over a temple dispute with Thailand. Vietnam has also seen citizen protests against Chinese actions in the South China Sea, where the uninhabited but hydrocarbon-rich Spratly Islands are the subject of a Sino-Vietnamese territorial dispute.

In Cambodia, the opposition held political rallies in the late 1990s, but the space for this is now circumscribed and the risks are high. In Vietnam and Laos, some individuals and groups have sought to organize against the state despite bans on opposition parties. There was a one-off protest by Laotian students and teachers in 1999, and in 2006 Vietnamese dissidents launched Bloc 8406, but in both cases the hammer of official repression came down hard and ended the outbreak of free speech and assembly.

As a force for political change, dissident or opposition activity is outweighed in all three countries by a new and quieter form of behind-the-scenes activism on the part of the countries’ emerging middle classes. Working through various networks and NGOs, Vietnamese, Cambodi-

ans, and (to a lesser extent) Laotians with some means and education at their disposal are beginning to lobby their respective governments on issues ranging from resource protection to safeguards for the rights of women and the disabled. For the most part, the process is thinly institutionalized at best and relies heavily on activists' personal connections as well as the willingness of state organs to engage civil society. Nevertheless, there is a sense of progress being made, as well-connected NGOs are able to "work the system" and get results. Here one should stress that this civil society activism often has a fiercely nationalist cast and is not (or at least not yet) pushing to replace the one-party system, but only seeks to reform a party-state to which some activists profess fervent loyalty.

The emergence of civil society would not have been possible without the many social changes that have occurred in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos since 1986. Citizens, including especially those belonging to the urban middle class, are for the most part richer and better educated than previously. They travel more, are more likely to have worked for international organizations, and hence have more experience of how things are done in other countries. They are exposed to a wider variety of media both old and new, including international media. They are more confident and less willing to tolerate state excesses or abuse. This does not necessarily mean that they are demanding the end of the one-party system, but they are conscious of their rights and want a greater say in matters that affect them.

There is of course a tension between this emerging middle-class mindset and the change-averse elite political culture discussed earlier. Yet the tension is less severe than one might think, in part because the middle classes and elites influence each other. Much of the Southeast Asian middle class has emerged at not too far a remove from the state and remains tied to it, often via family members who serve as state officials. Conversely, officeholders too travel, take in foreign media, and interact with international organizations—social changes affect state employees as well as other citizens. Thus the character of the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian ruling elites is changing in a process that can be expected to affect the ruling parties as well, even if the pace of change within the elite establishment lags behind what one sees in society (and especially urban society) at large.<sup>14</sup>

### **Looking to the Future**

What does the future hold for the politics of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos? Regime collapse is unlikely in any of the three—those who rule in Hanoi, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane do not have their backs against the wall. The party-state in each country derives legitimacy from a variety of sources: economic performance, nationalism, concerns about

order, and the personal charisma of top officials, for instance. Saying precisely how much regime support exists or how strong it runs is tricky, however, since people are reluctant to speak openly and there is no objective and scientific opinion polling. As for elections, in Vietnam and Laos all candidates must be vetted by the Communist Party, and most are Party members. Cambodia has elections in which opposition parties run, but vote-buying and intimidation are major concerns. All three states, moreover, have imposing security forces. The Hun Sen regime in Cambodia is arguably the least stable because of the more brutal and rapacious manner in which its elites go about piling up private wealth. Yet it is also the fiercest of the three states when it comes to stamping out opposition.

The collapse of communism in China would be likely to have repercussions for all three countries, much as the collapse of communism in Vietnam would affect Cambodia and Laos. Yet few scholars expect such an outcome in the near future. Cambodia's CPP could face trouble when Hun Sen leaves the scene, but he is 60 years old and could rule for some while yet. The party-states in Vietnam and Laos, by contrast, rely on collective leadership and so have less need to worry about a succession crisis.

The matter of Hun Sen aside, our analysis leads us to anticipate the continuation of the existing regimes in all three states for some years, yet combined with a gradual evolution of the underlying political system. This evolution has been taking place over the last fifteen or twenty years. It means that while there has been no change in the ruling parties (even in Cambodia, where the CPP was able to strongarm its way back into power fairly quickly despite losing the 1993 election), society as a whole has not stood still and its ferment has had an effect on the ruling elite itself. In time, this will widen the scope of what is possible.

In the long term, we would not rule out the possibility that the Vietnamese and Laotian communist parties could decide to allow other political parties to form, or that the CPP in Cambodia might allow existing opposition parties to operate more freely. Yet the elitist, nonliberal political cultures of these three countries are changing only slowly, and control over public offices still means big money, so the "long term" may be a long way off indeed. Much the same could be said regarding other countries in Southeast Asia as well. Perhaps things might evolve into a situation not unlike that in South Korea, which about a quarter-century after its transition is a functioning democracy, but one where traditional ways (such as the tendency of everything to revolve around the person of the president) persist and lend a distinctive character to political life there.<sup>15</sup>

Will such an evolution occur in our three Southeast Asian countries? With regard to Cambodia, one cannot say so with much confidence. Such (currently enfeebled) opposition forces as do exist there neither stand

apart decisively from the authoritarian values of traditional political culture nor stand firmly on the ground of classic constitutional liberalism. Thus if some version of the opposition were to ever find its way into office, which is not likely in the short term, it would take along elitist and paternalist assumptions about how political life is to be conducted.

Turning to Vietnam and Laos, one can applaud the growth of civil society activism while also soberly recognizing that while it reveals some liberal influences, it is also less than thoroughly liberal in outlook. Thus with regard to none of the three countries would it be fair to assume that a regime change in the direction of multipartism will in and of itself betoken the triumph of liberal values.

Still, such a shift away from one-party rule would represent great progress, so it is worth considering how it might come about. If the experience of other states is any guide, one possible scenario is that the ruling party itself will come to see the existing political system as a liability and move to change it. Widespread protests might be involved, as they were in South Korea during the second half of the 1980s. Or the process might be a more placid affair of the sort that unfolded in Taiwan at around the same time. There, the ruling Chinese Nationalists began dialoguing with the opposition in 1986 not due to popular pressure, but rather as part of a strategic bid to ease the Republic of China's growing marginalization on the world scene as Beijing reengaged.<sup>16</sup> In South Korea, change came in 1987 when Roh Tae-woo, the presidential candidate of the ruling Democratic Justice Party, broke ranks with incumbent Chun Doo-hwan by agreeing with opposition demands for direct presidential elections in the face of massive social and labor unrest.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, crisis-generated splits within elite ranks are common drivers of political change in many places. In both the Korean and Taiwanese cases, the ruling party won time for itself insofar as it was some years into multipartism before the opposition won office. It is not hard to imagine a similar situation playing itself out in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos in years to come.

Another scenario envisions ruling parties scheming to undercut any emerging opposition by forming regime-friendly "loyal" opposition groups. The long-ruling People's Action Party of Singapore has done something similar with its "nominated members of parliament."<sup>18</sup> Such an approach might seem appealing to old-line ruling-party elites made nervous by the prospect of real opposition politics. Yet it is hard to see how setting up a "tame" opposition can generate legitimacy or mollify those who want far-reaching change. Nevertheless, it is not out of the question that elites in Vietnam or Laos might choose to go this route to avoid what they fear would be a divisive and destabilizing process of political-party formation. Whichever of these routes Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos eventually take, what is certain is that a sudden and wholesale ascendancy of liberal politics is the least likely outcome.

## NOTES

1. Borje Ljunggren, ed., *The Challenge of Reform in Indochina* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

2. Barry Naughton, *Growing Out of the Plan: Chinese Economic Reform, 1978–93* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22.

3. Adam Fforde, “The Political Economy of ‘Reform’ in Vietnam: Some Reflections,” unpubl. ms., 1991, 8.

4. Søren Ivarsson, Thommy Svensson, and Stein Tønnesson, *The Quest for Balance in a Changing Laos: A Political Analysis*, NIAS Reports 25, 1995, Nordic Institute for Asian Studies, Copenhagen, 51–52.

5. Communist Party of Vietnam, *Seventh National Congress: Documents* (Hanoi: Vietnam Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991), 104; and Ivarsson et al., *Quest for Balance*, 38–39.

6. Caroline Hughes, *The Political Economy of the Cambodian Transition, 1991–2001* (London: Routledge, 2003).

7. David Chandler, “Cambodia in 2009: Plus C’est la Même Chose,” *Asian Survey* 50 (January–February 2010): 229.

8. Without being deterministic or forgetting the mutability of culture, I would posit that the resistance to democracy in these societies lies at the intersection where something uniquely Southeast Asian meets a legacy of longtime communist rule. The notion of “something uniquely Southeast Asian” refers to the influence of India over China—or a coming-together of Indian and Chinese influence—in the precolonial era and the way in which this influence worked its way differently through Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, respectively, with the upshot in each being a legacy that endures to this day. For more on this, see Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ching Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Robert S. Newman, *Brahmin and Mandarin: A Comparison of the Cambodian and Vietnamese Revolutions*, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Working Papers, Monash University, 1978.

9. Geir Helgesen and Li Xing, “Good Governance—Democracy or *Minzhu*,” in Hans Antlöv and Tak-Wing Ngo, eds., *The Cultural Construction of Politics in Asia* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 175–202.

10. R.H. Taylor, ed., *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

11. Antlöv and Ngo, *Cultural Construction of Politics*.

12. Martin Gainsborough, Dang Ngoc Dinh, and Tran Thanh Phuong, “Corruption, Public Administration and Development: Challenges and Opportunities as Viet Nam Moves Towards Middle-Income Status,” in Jairo Acuña-Alfaro, ed., *Reforming Public Administration Reform in Vietnam: Current Situation and Recommendations* (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2009), 377–427.

13. Caroline Hughes, “Cambodia in 2007: Development and Dispossession,” *Asian Survey* 48 (January–February 2008): 71.

14. Although reliable comparative data are hard to come by, all three countries have seen high levels of rural-to-urban migration during the reform years. The cities in Vietnam and Cambodia are much larger than those in Laos, but there too the process of urbaniza-

tion and its effects have been no less significant. Masses of rural migrants strain urban infrastructure and bring new social pressures to bear. In terms of the urban middle class, there are signs of its growth in all three countries as evidenced by conspicuous consumption, foreign travel and education, and increased leisure time. Middle-class political activism, generally of a reformist nature, is most pronounced in Vietnam, though Cambodia and Laos have nascent networks of middle-class activists as well. For background see Sarthi Acharya, "Labour Migration in the Transitional Economies of South-East Asia," Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, December 2003, 1–21; and Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas, eds., *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

15. Tat Yan Kong, "Power Alternation in South Korea," *Government and Opposition* 35 (July 2000): 370–91.

16. Laurence Whitehead, "Afterword: On Cultures and Contexts," in Antlöv and Ngo, *Cultural Construction of Politics*, 234.

17. Han Sung-Joo, "South Korea in 1987: The Politics of Democratization," *Asian Survey* 28 (January 1988): 52–61.

18. Michael Barr, "Perpetual Revisionism in Singapore: The Limits of Change," *Pacific Review* 16, no. 1 (2003): 77–97.