

# **Cambodia at a Crossroads**

## **The Narratives of Cambodia National Rescue Party Supporters after the 2013 Elections**

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### **Abstract**

Across Southeast Asia, election promises commonly centre on preferential access to state resources, rather than on policy platforms. In Cambodia, gift-giving practices have been a key strategy for the dominant Cambodian People's Party to seek electoral support. The surge in support for opposition CNRP in the 2013 elections, campaigning on an anti-money politics agenda, raises questions about popular perceptions of political gift-giving. Building on interviews with pro-CNRP demonstrators in post-election Cambodia, this paper asks how the 2013 electoral outcome relates to transforming popular values by exploring CNRP activists' narratives about who they are, the main problems facing today's Cambodia, gift-giving practices and rights. It employs these findings to reassess Cambodian popular electoral culture, and reframe running debates about the relations between states and populations seeking to access their resources in the region.

### **Keywords**

Elections, opposition politics, rights, patronage politics, Cambodia

### **Introduction**

In national elections on 28 July 2013, Cambodia's fifth since the introduction of a multi-party democratic system, a sharp rise in support for newly formed opposition party Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) took observers by surprise. The official election results placed long-incumbent Cambodian People's Party (CPP) at 48.83 per cent of votes, while the CNRP, a coalition between the two main opposition parties, came a close second at 44.46 per cent. This has broken the string of successive electoral triumphs of the CPP under the leadership of PM Hun Sen, which peaked

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at a record 58.1 per cent in 2008. The aftermath of the elections evidenced continued strong popular backing of the CNRP, leading eventually to a government crackdown, which suggests that, regardless of the future of the party, it has functioned as a vehicle channelling critical popular demands. To analyse current political change in Cambodia and assess possible future directions, we urgently need to understand the dynamics driving the surge in CNRP support.

This paper builds on 64 in-depth interviews with CNRP supporters in post-election Cambodia, carried out on 15 December 2013 at Freedom Park. These semi-discursive, tape-recorded interviews were conducted by eight university students from Phnom Penh's Royal University of Agriculture and later were analysed by the author. In December 2013 a series of mass demonstrations were staged at Freedom Park, the opposition rally point in central Phnom Penh. The CNRP rejected the official election results, alleging voting fraud, and refused to take their seats in parliament. The December mass protests called for new elections. On 15 December, when this research was carried out, about 10,000 people are estimated to have taken part (AFP 2013). Only three weeks later, on 4 January 2014, Freedom Park would be forcibly cleared and cordoned off by authorities, and a ban on demonstrations imposed, which was still in force at the time of writing. Taking place during a rare window of opportunity, these conversations with pro-CNRP demonstrators are uniquely placed to illuminate the concerns of opposition supporters.

This article seeks to answer three sets of questions. Who are the CNRP activists? What are the narratives they advance about themselves? Secondly, what do CNRP activists give as their reasons for joining the CNRP? What do they consider the main problems in contemporary Cambodia to be? Thirdly, what narratives circulate among them about rights and about gift-giving practices?

The Cambodian democratic project has been shaped by the tight grip that the CPP holds on voters through a patronage system which links the party to the rural electorate through gift-giving practices. It blends concerns about popular welfare, patriotism, anti-Communism, an anti-Vietnamese agenda, and a populist stance with the purported representation of global liberal democratic ideas (Hughes 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Un 2008). The CNRP, formed in 2012 by the merger between opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and the Human Rights Party (HRP), has challenged the CPP by advocating a rights-based agenda and sought to delegitimise CPP gift-giving in favour of job creation and decent salaries. The strong CNRP gains therefore raise the question of whether a new, "democratic", rights-based conscience is now emerging in Cambodia. Analyses to date have suggested that a long list of

structural issues, including a widening income gap, social injustice, a culture of impunity, nepotism, corruption, land grabbing, deforestation, low wages, high inflation, price fluctuations of agricultural commodities, high interest rates, and increasing Vietnamese immigration, all contributed to the CPP's loss of popular support (Chheang 2013). The elections have also been analysed in relation to a generational shift (McCargo 2014). This article seeks to evaluate the rise of the opposition based on the narratives of opposition supporters themselves, with a specific focus on attitudes towards political gift-giving and towards rights.

The case study of Cambodia has wide ramifications. Across Southeast Asia, election promises commonly centre on preferential access to state resources, rather than on policy platforms. Running debates on popular electoral culture in the Global South have turned to challenge mainstream interpretations of citizenship, which celebrate a struggle by individualistic citizens to expand their rights as a vital aspect of democratic consolidation, finding instead that populations are content to negotiate access to state resources, on however exceptional terms, typically in return for the vote.<sup>1</sup> In neighbouring Thailand, Andrew Walker finds that the population strategically pursues the mediation of state resources, guided by a distinct set of popular political values which endorse practices otherwise dismissed as vote-buying (Walker 2008, 2012). Seen through this lens, the ability of political candidates to mediate benefits is a strong driver of popular support. This research suggests that in Cambodia, on the contrary, the strategic pursuit of resource access does not account for the surge in support for the political opposition. Though there is an ideal of political gift-giving among CNRP supporters, rights trump gifts, and the real benefits mediated by the CNRP are not decisive for support.

### Patronage politics and the 2013 elections

The 2013 elections pitted two proposed political and economic orders against each other. In power since 1979, the incumbent Cambodian People's Party oversaw economic liberalisation in the late 1980s, out of which the current neo-patrimonial political system has emerged: a hybrid of informal patrimonial power based on patron-client relations mixed with formal legal-bureaucratic power (Pak et al. 2007: 43–47). The Cambodian state is structured along competing patron-client networks (*khsae*), and the ability to

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<sup>1</sup> For representatives of the former view, see e.g. Hadenius 2001; for the latter, see e.g. Chatterjee 2004, 2011.

provide clients with material resources is key to political power (Heder 1995). Power is consequently centralised among politicians and ministries in control of resources, which seek political support through the distribution of material gifts and physical infrastructure (Un 2005; Pak et al. 2007:58). CPP patronage benefactions are typically understood as a key factor in the electoral marginalisation of the opposition, and have steadily intensified since the first multi-party elections in 1993 (Heder 2012: 113). Throughout the multi-party democratic era, the party has brought donations to rural communities, which are understood to increase in the event of electoral support – what is known as the *choh moulothan* (“going down to the base”) strategy.<sup>2</sup> Gift-giving ceremonies (*pithi jaek omnaoy*), during which gifts (*omnaoy*) of money, food, clothing and utensils are handed out, typically take place prior to elections. Physical infrastructure – roads, bridges, schools and health clinics – is typically constructed or promised close to elections. Political gift-giving is consequently understood to be linked to votes (Pak et al. 2007: 58).

The CNRP represented an opposing model, typical of the Cambodian democratic tradition that the party has come out of. Drawing on Western democratic theory, democracy is defined by the equality bestowed by universal citizenship with pertaining rights (*setthi*). Similar to Thailand, democratisation is seen to require a change in popular mentality, and CNRP party officials envisage a change from a prevailing “beggar mentality” – which accepts gift-giving – to a “culture of citizenship” – based on employment and decent salaries. While in Thailand elites refuse to recognise the democratic legitimacy of popular electoral choices which they consider swayed by vote-buying, Cambodian democrats have sought to mould rural political choices through delegitimising clientelistic exchanges. Ahead of the 2013 elections, the CNRP cast political change as citizens spending their own resources and acting in accordance with their political conscience, rather than offering political allegiance in return for material support. CNRP discourse portrayed CPP gift-giving as the “buying of the conscience” (*dinh teuk jeut*) of the people. At the same time, the CNRP encouraged voters to receive CPP gifts – but refrain from voting for the party. This transmitted a readiness to accept the electorate’s dependence on gift-giving, but to imbue it with a sense of rejection.

The CNRP collected donations from election campaign participants and post-election demonstrators – including the December 2013 demonstrators through donation boxes at Freedom Park. At the same time, the party also offered financial support to participants in the form of transportation

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<sup>2</sup> See Un 2005: 221–22. Hughes 2006: 469 traces the practice of gift-giving to the beginning of Cambodia’s political and economic reform process around 1989.

and food. In the aftermath of the elections, the CNRP financially supported those injured at demonstration incidents and communities hit by the August to September 2013 flooding. According to the CNRP, its gift-giving differed from that of the CPP in that target villages were not selected on the basis of whether the party headed the commune, and that party membership was not a criterion for receiving gifts. Rather, after village party representatives contacted the party headquarters for help, the communities most in need would be singled out for support. CNRP leaders would later credit both their critique of CPP gift-giving practices, and their increased ability to assist voters through local networks, with their strong surge in electoral support.<sup>3</sup> Another main factor believed to have attracted support for the CNRP was the party's seven-point policy programme, focused on raising living standards. An important part of the programme guaranteed personal income: three points guaranteed minimum salaries and pensions. Two more points promised social benefits in the form of free healthcare and education. Another two points established a minimum price for rice and promised to lower prices of oil, fertilizer, electricity and loan interest rates.<sup>4</sup> The CNRP pledged to fund this programme by cutting back on corruption so as to re-appropriate missing state revenues.

The complexity of CNRP messages and practices raises the question of what motivated CNRP supporters. The Cambodian democratic project, steered by elites from the outset, has throughout its history been plagued by an elite bias (Chandler 1991: 30; Hughes 2009: 35; Corfield 1994: 10–11). The strong surge in popular support raises the question of whether the party agenda has now been aligned with the concerns of the electorate, or at least the nucleus of those who came out in support of the party. The political opposition has previously negotiated tensions between the leadership and supporters' agendas at political rallies, where messages from the top have been filtrated down to subtly modify supporters' political analysis (Hughes 2002). The demonstrations of December 2013, the largest since the introduction of multi-party democracy, were a key meeting point for – potentially disparate – oppositional ideas.

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<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with CNRP lawmaker Mu Sochua, 20 November 2013.

<sup>4</sup> The seven points of the programme are: a monthly pension for individuals aged 65 years and above of 40,000 riels (USD 10); a minimum monthly salary for workers of 600,000 riels (USD 150); a minimum monthly salary for civil servants of one million riels (USD 250); farmers guaranteed to receive at least 1,000 riels (USD 0.25) per kilogram of rice; free medical care for the poor; equal education opportunities and proper youth employment; and a reduction in the prices of oil, fertilisers and electricity and in interest rates on loans.

## Who are the CNRP supporters?

Media has tended to construct a narrative about who the CNRP supporters are. These analyses have typically stressed that the CNRP has benefited from demographic changes – many of its voters are believed to have come from the around 33 per cent of Cambodians classified as youth (between 15 and 30 years of age).<sup>5</sup> An explosion in the use of social media, particularly Facebook, is believed to have contributed to awakening their political conscience. CNRP supporters are also generally believed to have a base among the around 20 per cent of Cambodians made landless by evictions (cf. Kung 2013; Tolson 2013). This section examines the pro-CNRP demonstrators' narratives about their social composition, but in the absence of extensive surveys makes no claim to objectively account for the composition of pro-CNRP demonstrators gathering at Freedom Park in December 2013 (cf. Thabchumpon / McCargo 2011: 1000). Rather, it seeks to explore alternative narratives launched by a selection of CNRP supporters themselves.

Most of the interviewees were middle-aged, either in their forties or fifties. 26 interviewees were women and 38 were men. The majority came from, in declining order of numbers, Kampong Cham province (15 interviewees), Kandal province (14), Svay Rieng province (12), Prey Veng province (9) and Phnom Penh with suburbs (7). The geographic origin of interviewees closely reflects the vote, as the CNRP made strong gains in Phnom Penh and in the traditionally CPP-dominated Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng and Prey Veng, and in Kandal.<sup>6</sup> The educational level of the demonstrators was typically low. About half of the interviewees had attended only elementary school, or lacked schooling (33 interviewees). High school was the highest level attended (by 13 interviewees), and no one had studied at university. An overwhelming majority – about two thirds (42 interviewees) – were farmers. A third of these supplemented their farming income with an additional source, such as selling food and beverages, motorbike repairs, etc. The remaining interviewees were traders, except for a handful of construction workers and unemployed.

Contrary to the plausibility that perceptions of relative poverty may have catalysed support for the opposition, a majority of interviewees con-

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<sup>5</sup> Statistics provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS 2011).

<sup>6</sup> The CNRP made gains in Phnom Penh (CNRP 7 seats vs. CPP 5 seats, compared to CPP 7 seats and SRP 5 seats in 2008); traditionally CPP-dominated Kampong Cham (CNRP 10 vs. CPP 8, compared to CPP 11 vs. SRP and HRP 6 in 2008); Svay Rieng (CPP 3 vs. CNRP 2, compared to CPP 5 in 2008); Prey Veng (CNRP 6 vs. CPP 5, compared to CPP 7 vs. SRP and HRP 3 in 2008); and in Kandal (CNRP 6 vs. CPP 5, compared to CPP 7 vs. SRP and HRP 4 in 2008).

sidered their own economic situation to be average. About 4 out of 10 thought of themselves as poor, while no-one self-identified as rich. Three quarters were in debt, mostly to microfinance institutions, including ACLEDA, Amret, or Prasac. About half of these owed sums ranging between USD 100 – 1,000, while loans were as high as USD 6,000. This suggests a higher incidence of indebtedness than nationwide, which stands at 1.2 m borrowers (2012), and slightly higher loans than nationwide, which average USD 500–900 (Liv 2013; Weinland / May 2012). One quarter were below or hovering just around the poverty line, slightly higher than the 18.6 percent estimated nationwide. At the same time, almost all interviewees owned their own land, typically around 1 ha.

Almost all interviewees claimed to be CNRP members. Contrary to a widespread CNRP narrative that had it that many CPP members joined the demonstrations, only one in ten professed CPP membership. Roughly half claimed to have been members of the political opposition before the formation of the CNRP, indicating only relatively stable long-term overall support for the opposition. Almost all listened to independent radio channel Radio Free Asia nearly every day, but very few had access to Facebook. This presents a picture of the typical pro-CNRP demonstrator interviewed as a land-owning middle-aged farmer who considers him/herself to be of average economic standing, but is indebted, who has access to radio, but not to social media. This by no means rules out the typical image of the average CNRP supporter, which may well be more representative. It does, however, point to the existence of another type of supporter, equally present at Freedom Park in December 2013.<sup>7</sup>

### **Cambodia's challenges and reasons for CNRP support**

The CNRP appears to be channelling a variety of forms of social discontent, and one of the main challenges for the party is to keep supporters together under its umbrella. The CNRP has mobilised supporters around the notion of “change”, which can be understood as tying together a plurality of narratives, including an aspiration for regime change, an anti-corruption agenda, and a demand for social justice. In whatever way it is understood by CNRP supporters, the notion of “change” has typically been interpreted as their

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<sup>7</sup> From first-hand observations of Freedom Park from July 2013 to January 2014, the author had the impression that urban youth supporters progressively thinned out and rural elements became more dominant on the square, although there is no additional data to support this impression.

overriding priority, rather than loyalty to the party as such. The post-election period evidenced that supporters were sometimes more radical than the party leaders, and the CNRP leaders reportedly had to consult with core supporters at Freedom Park during the course of their negotiations with the CPP for a political settlement, raising the spectre of a rift with the support base (Kung 2013). Two questions arise in this context: What reasons do pro-CNRP demonstrators give for supporting the CNRP and what do they consider the main problems facing contemporary Cambodia to be?

A widespread narrative among the interviewees was that they were loyal CNRP supporters who had joined the demonstration out of love for the party rather than a vague desire for change. Nearly all pledged their love for the CNRP as their immediate reason for demonstrating, rather than a general desire for change. This suggests that loyalty to and affection for the CNRP was an important shared narrative among Freedom Park demonstrators – despite the contending centrifugal forces let loose on the square.<sup>8</sup> Interviewees claimed not to expect any immediate benefits from their participation. Almost all stated that they had not been offered anything for joining the demonstration, and the handful who did mentioned sponsorship of the trip by their communities. Asked whether they believed that joining the demonstration would make it easier to secure different resources from the CNRP, nearly all indicated that they expected only the long-term national benefits which they believed would follow from a CNRP electoral victory. Some explicitly rejected the idea of receiving resources in return for their participation as they interpreted this as personal benefits, as opposed to desired social change. Only a handful gave more ambiguous responses that could indicate an expectation of personal benefits to follow.

Four widespread narratives circulated among demonstrators about the reasons for their support for the CNRP. Firstly, interviewees cited the CNRP leadership's ability and eagerness to understand general living conditions (*chivopheap*). This line of reasoning focused on the CNRP leadership's readiness to put themselves in the shoes of ordinary people. CNRP leaders were said to have close relations with the people, to "care" about general living conditions, and to demonstrate this by inquiring into people's real living circumstances (*cheah suor sokh tukkh pracheareastr*). They were perceived as respecting ordinary people, to whom party representatives were commonly said to "speak politely". Based on their ability to identify popular concerns, CNRP leaders were believed to also have the ability to address

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<sup>8</sup> For example, prominent regime critic and monk But Bunthenh, head of the Independent Monk Network for Social Justice, reportedly mobilised segments of the demonstrators against the CNRP.



them. Help was offered in the form of moral support, the promise held out by the seven points, support for the workers' movement and through organising demonstrations. One narrative strand held that the CNRP would wipe out differences between the poor and the rich. CNRP leaders' compassion would urge them to "save the poor" and "liberate the people from their hardship", putting an end to perceived abusive CPP practices.

Secondly, demonstrators mentioned the concrete benefits which they believed would follow from the formation of a CNRP-led government. Typically drawing these from the party's seven points, they included salary rises, pensions, counteracting youth unemployment, free education, stimulating the agricultural market, and the capping of prices of certain goods. Nearly all knew the seven points, which were supported because of a perception that they would ameliorate living conditions. The promise of guaranteed salaries ranked highest. It was followed by the promise of pensions, free education, that the points would address the needs of farmers (through the fixed price of rice and raising salaries of civil servants to eliminate corruption), free healthcare, and the perception that these points, taken together, would counteract labour migration abroad. In addition, one important reason for support of this welfare programme was that it was perceived to benefit all strata of society – both since it targeted a mix of societal groups, and since it promised to help without discrimination between rich and poor. For example, free education was extolled because it would allow equality between the children of the poor and the rich.

A third narrative strand emphasised that the CNRP championed democratic principles and a rights-based agenda. The CNRP was considered to work towards democracy (*pracheathipatey*), to claim freedom rights (*setthi seripheap*) for the people and seek justice (*yuttethor*). As part of this struggle, the party would eradicate current corruption and nepotism under the CPP.

Fourthly, the patriotism of the CNRP was cited. The CNRP was characterized as patriots who would serve and defend the nation. They would protect the territory, liberate the nation from Vietnamese influence, limit immigration, and end perceived discrimination against Khmer nationals.

Interviewees were also asked to choose their most important reasons for supporting the CNRP from a list which included land concessions and land rights, workers' situation, youth unemployment, difficult general living conditions, CNRP's policies, and corruption. Land concessions and land rights ranked highest, followed by difficult general living conditions and workers' rights. Land grabbing was also the most commonly encountered problem, faced by a little under a half of those who mentioned it.

These replies indicate that the perceived readiness of politicians to put themselves in ordinary people's situation out of a desire to help – with all

the moral overtones this carries – is the most important criterion of political leadership among political opposition supporters. Seen through this lens, the CNRP gains can be attributed to a perception that the party has successfully read popular needs, overcoming the elite bias that previously created barriers. In particular, the seven points, this suggests, successfully decipher popular demands. The supporters' parallel championing of democracy and patriotism also indicate a fundamental symmetry between party supporters and party leadership. Academic writing on the Cambodian democratic opposition often presents its politics as double-faced – embracing on the one hand “democratic”, and on the other, racist and xenophobic tendencies (See Un 2008; Hughes 2001c). Arguably, however, these notions are considered to be mutually reinforcing not only by party leadership, but also by supporters who posit the achievement of democracy as contingent on liberation from Vietnamese Communist influence. The naming of land issues, meanwhile, supports the common reading that landlessness as a specific issue has contributed to the increase in oppositional support.

### **Narratives of gift-giving**

In spite of the CNRP anti-money politics agenda, supporters overwhelmingly supported politicians' giving through private means. Only a quarter of interviewees preferred public funding to politicians' giving of their private funds. These argued that politicians' use of their own money implied an expectation of political support in return. This view held that public funds should be used for common purposes as they constitute the shared budget of all citizens.

The majority of supporters, however, preferred politicians giving of their private resources. The reason given was moral: political gift-giving was typically considered as evidence that the politicians would take the trouble to understand general living conditions, and had the conscience (*teuk chett*) to fulfil popular needs. One respondent thus typically argued that: “It is good if politicians use their own money for the people, since it is good if they know how to help the people (*cheah chuoy reastr*), how to think about the people.” Gifts were therefore considered proof of the high moral standing of politicians, displaying their conscience. Representative of this view, another demonstrator stated that: “[...] if politicians give gifts, it means that they are good. It is their conscience (*teuk chett*), their feeling.”

The approval of gift-giving was not confined to gift-giving as occasional support on an ad hoc basis. Rather, gift-giving was supported as a system of provision for popular needs. Gift-giving was even characterised

by some as a “form of development” which would create a balance between the rich and poor and eventually come to blot out differences between them. Though this was not a widespread perception, some demonstrators assumed that the CNRP’s seven points were to be funded by the party leadership, rather than state funds. For example, one man who disapproved of the use of public funds praised the giving out of private means, which he assumed would fund the CNRP pledge for a monthly pension of USD 10.

Though robust, support of gift-giving was typically qualified by several conditions. Most importantly, the gift-giver should not expect to receive anything in return for the gift, which only then would be an “honest” one (*smoh trong*). A typical statement thus had it that:

Gift-giving is good if you don’t want anything back from the people, if you give out of generosity; because of true love for the people. If you want to benefit from it, it is not a good practice.

Moreover, gift-giving should not discriminate by political party affiliation or wealth. These two conditions faulted current CPP gift-giving, which all interviewees, without exception, consequently loathed. Firstly, CPP gift-giving was considered dishonest in the sense that gifts were believed to be given to receive the vote. This violated the moral code that prescribes that gifts should not be for one’s own benefit. Echoing CNRP rhetoric, demonstrators typically characterised CPP gift-giving as the “buying of the people’s conscience”:

The gifts of the CPP are not honest gifts (*omnaoy daoy smoh sâ*), they are gifts to receive something in return. Gifts only for the sake of benefits is a bad practice.

I disagree with it because they want their own benefit. They distribute gifts to buy people’s conscience and to buy their votes (*tinھ teuk chett, tinھ sânluk chnot*).

There was a widespread conviction that the popular conscience could, however, not be bought. CPP gift-giving was therefore widely believed to have contributed to the decline in electoral support for the party:

It [CPP gift-giving] cannot buy the ideals and the love of the people. As soon as elections approach the CPP hand out gifts, but they only think about their own interest. This makes the people hate the CPP ever more strongly.

Secondly, demonstrators condemned CPP gift-giving because of perceptions of nepotism. Gifts were perceived to be biased in a twofold sense – given only among CPP party members, and favouring the wealthy:

It is not good because those are gifts that discriminate, those rich people only give to people from the same party. If those gifts could reach the truly poor I would be happy.

First of all, they only give to their own party supporters. Secondly, they give in order of how poor you are, so that the rich receive more.

A third line of criticism held that gifts were inadequate in scale and would alleviate needs only for a short period of time. Fundamentally unpredictable and unreliable, they were contrasted unfavourably with employment, which would generate a stable income. Often, this line of reasoning formed part of a larger political analysis, in which gift-giving was considered part of a CPP strategy to divert popular attention from national issues, such as the alleged loss of territory to Vietnam and natural resource degradation. This suggests that the CNRP party discourse, which likewise charges that the CPP seeks to control the populace through keeping it in poverty and making it dependent on gift-giving, has got through to supporters (cf. Sam 2008: 228–29):

These gifts, there is nothing great about them. Don't let territory be sold off, don't let forests be cut. Before, when I saw them [the CPP] distributing gifts, I used to feel disappointed with not getting anything, but later I came to know that they gave these gifts because they wanted our vote.

This [gift-giving] is a policy that impoverishes the people ever more. They appropriate money from taxation, people's land, and their resources. Then, when elections approach, they distribute small gifts to buy people's conscience in order to remain in power for a long time.

What would be good would be to provide the people with employment. When there is flooding, they give gifts to the victims, but if we ask what the disaster was caused by, it was the cutting down of forests. Gifts cannot help us for a long time, like employment can.

Several demonstrators echoed the line propagated by the CNRP ahead of elections – that citizens could legitimately receive CPP gifts as long as their receipt did not translate into electoral support for the party. Often, demonstrators even framed this as a *right* to receive gifts. This indicates that the CNRP strategy to accept the electorate's dependence on gift-giving while infusing a sense of moral rejection was successful for connecting with supporters.

If they give, I take the gift. For me, it doesn't mean that I steal or beg. It means that they distribute gifts and make it possible for me to take them. Before the elections we received one sarong each. They [the CPP] gave them so that we would vote for them [...] but I didn't.

If the CPP wants to give gifts, do so, but the people will still support the CNRP. When they give gifts we have to take them because if we don't they will only distribute among themselves.

When the elections are approaching they bring us gifts. At that time I think that all those things are rubbish, but I have to receive it, because all those things are *our* rubbish.

Significantly, the ideal of gift-giving did at the same time cast the possibility of future gifts from the CNRP in a positive light, since supporters were certain of the party's honest intentions. One demonstrator summed this up as:

It is a good thing if the CNRP use their own money to help the people, because they are not corrupt. [...] Gifts are good funding, gifts that are not used to buy the conscience of the people – honest gifts.

The CNRP were believed to be morally capable of realising the ideal form of gift-giving which the CPP had failed to do.

In spite of the CNRP supporters' positive eye towards giving by private funds, gift-giving was not generally seen as a necessary requirement for political leadership. Three quarters named other characteristics as more important for ideal political leadership, which reflected the four discourses of why demonstrators supported the CNRP. They included knowing about the well-being of the people (*cheah doeng suor sokh tukkh pracheapolroath*), taking the people seriously (*yok pracheachon chea thum*), supporting the people; protecting the country, patriotism, loving the people and nation; leading the country in a democratic manner, knowing about freedom rights; bringing development; and mental and intellectual abilities such as a having a good conscience, good thoughts and manners, incorruptibility, making sacrifices for the people, having high knowledge, morality (*promvihearthor, kunthor*), and ideals.

This suggests that while the above qualities are considered prerequisites for political leadership, wealth is not. If, however, these other conditions are fulfilled, wealth is a welcome bonus. One demonstrator elaborated:

Wealth is not a prerequisite. Other qualities, such as patriotism, knowing about the well-being of the people, ideals and the will to sacrifice come first. However, wealth would be an advantage if it is distributed to the people without discrimination, if it is shared with the poor. But if politicians only have money and do not care about the people, there will be no improvement.

More rarely, interviewees were opposed to the very idea of politicians being wealthy. These respondents typically referred to how wealth would be used to “buy the conscience of the people” – i.e. the vote. For this minority, the collective experience of such practices had invalidated gift-giving as a desired model of political behaviour.

## **Narratives of rights**

While the CNRP party agenda has sought to replace money politics with a rights-based agenda, CNRP demonstrators' support for political gift-giving co-exists with a strong belief in and desire for rights (*setthi*). In line with

CNRP discourse, they propagate an ideal of citizenship based on the recognition of the existence of rights innate to all.

In this view, the right to political participation is bestowed simply by being one of the people – a citizen (*pracheapolroath*).<sup>9</sup> Demonstrators typically justified their right to political involvement by their citizenship status, through statements such as “Being citizens we must have the right to be politically involved”. Demonstrators overwhelmingly considered political rights to be lacking, and that they needed to be claimed (*team tear*). Put differently, the rights-claiming citizen can be understood as the demonstrators’ ideal model of popular political behaviour. Rights-claiming was the envisaged manner of transmitting popular needs to politicians, an attitude which placed responsibility for the achievement of rights on ordinary people.

Rights were central to this version of citizenship since they defined the relationship between the individual and the political community as one of fundamental equality and individual independence. Consequently, rights would ensure personal dignity and even mental well-being. One demonstrator put it thus:

The right to a decent livelihood, the right to a place to live, the right not to be abused – all these rights are the foundation of human existence. The provision of resources it is not enough: we need to be healthy both physically and mentally.

Demonstrators expressed an overwhelming desire to receive public services such as health care, education facilities, etc. as a matter of right, rather than as gifts. The attainment of rights would wipe out the need for gifts. Above all, a guaranteed income was widely considered an inviolable right, and was clearly preferred over the receipt of gifts. This suggests that a main reason accounting for the popularity of the CNRP’s seven points is the focus on income. Belief in the centrality of decent personal incomes for the citizenry, enabling citizens to assume financial responsibility for themselves and for the nation, is at the heart of the CNRP party agenda. The name of the Cambodian National Rescue Party echoes the phrase *sangkruos cheat* (“national rescue” or “salvation”) which was once part of the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation, the precursor to the CPP (Strangio 2014: 158). By choosing it, the CNRP makes a rival claim to that of the Cambodian People’s Party to save the Cambodian people. This national salvation has

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<sup>9</sup> The democratic opposition typically uses the term *pracheapolroath* to refer to the people, which can be translated as “popular citizens”, in contrast to the CPP, which typically uses *pracheachon* (“people”), or royalists, who employ *pracheareastr* (“subjects”). This competing vocabulary has its roots in political dialects used in competing political projects in the period leading up to national independence in 1953. See Heder 2007: 29–98.

been tied to earning and spending private income as opposed to the passive receipt of gifts, such as in the electoral campaign slogan: “My gasoline, my motorbike, my money, my morale, save my nation. Change! Change! Change!” This referred to how CNRP campaign rally participants would ride their own motorbikes and spend their own money on gasoline rather than receive compensation for their participation, and tied the rejection of gifts to assuming responsibility for the nation. Demonstrators often reproduced this dichotomy between receiving gifts on the one hand, and saving oneself and thereby the nation on the other, as in the words “I don’t want gifts – I have myself, I save myself”.

The right to income was often contrasted with the public infrastructure projects that underlie much of the CPP’s performance legitimacy, but which demonstrators had an overwhelmingly negative view of. Weighing guaranteed personal income against public infrastructure projects such as bridges and roads, a majority of demonstrators expressed a clear preference for decent salaries. The main reason given was the ability of salaries to improve livelihoods. Demonstrators commonly expressed a perception that the CPP, by emphasizing their own achievements in public infrastructure, admired (*loek sârsaoer*) or bragged about (*uot*) their own achievements:

I support the CNRP seven points because they guarantee personal income, not like the party in power which only values (*sârsaoer*) public infrastructure such as bridges and roads.

I support the seven points because they make it easier for the people, rather than admiring only their own achievements (*kar sârsaoer tae pi snadai khluon*).

Dissatisfaction with perceived CPP pride-taking in public infrastructure led some demonstrators to reject current projects altogether, on the grounds that these projects, though assumed to be funded by public funds, were presented as gifts.

The perceived legitimacy, and even desirability, of gifts at the same time as rights are considered to trump gifts is, if not inherently contradictory, a major tension at the heart of the Cambodian democratic opposition’s support base. It can be explained by the fact that competing cultural and political models which celebrate gift-giving or rights simultaneously resonate with facets of popular aspirations. Its consequences for Cambodian democracy today are dramatic and deep: a popular model of citizenship is emerging among democratic opposition supporters that incorporates these discordant notions. This model of citizenship will doubtlessly evolve in tandem with the responses of political parties. Faced with the reality of its supporters’ ambitions, the CNRP leadership has the choice of either seeking to mould these or strategically adjusting to them.

## **Conclusion**

Two years on from the momentous 2013 elections, Cambodia finds itself in a volatile situation. A key determinant of future political developments is whether the CNRP will manage to maintain popular support by channelling popular grievances ahead of the 2018 elections. By shedding light on pro-CNRP demonstrators' demands and ambitions, these results illuminate future possible pathways of popular politics and their intersection with party politics.

These conversations reveal a partial divide between official CNRP discourse and activists' concerns, but also substantial points of intersection. CNRP support is ultimately attributable to a perception that the party has identified real popular concerns. Competing elite projects have long propagated the view that legitimate leadership hinges on the ability to understand general living conditions. The responses of pro-CNRP demonstrators indicate that this ability is the main criterion for popular support. Seen from this perspective, the surge in support for the democratic opposition evidences the success of its conscious strategy to overcome its elite bias by setting out to identify popular needs.

In their reasons for support, opposition supporters blend patriotic concerns with pro-democratic ones. The democratic opposition parties have long done so, which has typically been understood as an uncomfortable amalgamation of a shallow pro-democratic stance, exaggerated for the benefit of international observers, and nationalist rhetoric for the sake of rural electoral mobilisation. Yet, as it arguably is for the CNRP leadership, the nexus between democracy and the nation is central to activists' political imaginings as the two are considered as part of the same battle.

The CNRP has championed an anti-money politics agenda. Yet, demonstrators overwhelmingly support giving of private funds. They reject CPP gift-giving not because of an overall rejection of political gift-giving, but because of perceptions of vote-buying and nepotism. Conversely, demonstrators strongly support political gift-giving, if given in earnest, as an ideal model of political behaviour. This suggests that the CNRP party leadership – aware of this duality – struck the right chord when placing an increased emphasis on providing material support, allegedly without bias. Such proof of an ability to provide was arguably a contributing cause for the CNRP's electoral gains – confirming the party leadership's post-election analysis. Future developments depend on the extent to which the party leadership will continue to provide through party channels – which would surely continue to boost its popularity – or, if it is serious about moving preferences away from



donations, to what extent it can make this shift resonate with the support base.

Although political gift-giving can form part of democratic accountability for CNRP supporters, it cannot provide an alternative form of democratic accountability. The real benefits mediated by the CNRP are dwarfed by those distributed by the CPP to the extent that they cannot be regarded as decisive for political support. Rights trump gifts and are evidently a motivational force for contemporary political struggle. This tension calls into question the strict dichotomization between rights-seeking and gift-seeking, shared by accounts of popular political behaviour that focus on individualistic rights-claiming citizens and by accounts that posit that populations are content to access state resources as gifts alike. In its stead, a blurred set of popular preferences emerges. The ability of the CNRP to negotiate these is arguably key to its future fortunes.

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