Astrid Noren-Nilsson

Cambodia's Second Kingdom. Nation, Imagination, and Democracy. Ithaca, N.Y.:

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Cambodia's Second Kingdom provides unique insight into the dynamics of Cambodian elites' representations of their respective visions for the nation in multiparty politics after the United Nations-sponsored general election in 1993. Two themes stand out as the major contributions of this book. First, this book brings to the center of analysis local agency, i.e. Cambodian political elites' competing imaginings and representation of the nation, by relying on a huge amount of interview data. Second, it offers a new perspective on Cambodia's elite political culture. Emphasizing the importance of local agency, Noren-Nilsson challenges conventional wisdom and labeling about the fate of democracy in Cambodia, and offers a nuanced analysis of Cambodian political elites' agency in the form of imagination, representation, and perpetuation of their respective political identity. Instead of being the objects of democratization, this book shows, these elites are shrewd identity entrepreneurs in their own rights, selectively drawing on the past, manipulating historically transmitted notions, and interpreting the present-day concepts of democracy and social justice to mold their political identity through hegemonic representation of the nation. Each political party lays hegemonic claim to the embodiment of their particular vision of the nation.

According to Noren-Nilsson, the three contending political parties and their paramount leaders compete for hegemony over national representation. While the royalists have turned to Sihanoukism and Sihanouk's emphasis on national union rather than liberal democracy to redefine their political identity, Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) invented populist tradition of People's Democracy by drawing on the widely known Sdech Kan narrative, a commoner-turned king, to symbolize himself a just national leader and the one who has brought about total peace and national reconciliation in 1998 through his Win-Win strategy. Challenging Hun Sen's rule, Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, the leaders of the democrats and the Cambodian National Rescue Party, invoked the narrative of Cambodia's national survival, to which Hun Sen's and CPP's debt to their Vietnamese creator, and his regime's rampant corruption and unjust economic development policy are represented and perpetuated as an existential threat. Cambodia's future orientation is and will be determined by the trinity of these competing supra-ideologies.

Notably this book also problematizes the notion of Cambodia's political culture in the sense that it is not static or fixed with its unchanging property. This

book shows that Cambodian political elites proactively and innovatively imagined, adapted, and reinvented their political identities to the reality of their time. The author calls this 'political elite imaginings'. The diversity of culturally and historically transmitted political orders, not one more 'traditional' than another, highlights the adaptability of cultural notions and demonstrates that they are neither static nor homogenous (p. 168). Hence, this book suggests new areas of promising research on the changing nature of elite political culture in Cambodia.

However, an ardent observer of Prime Minister Hun Sen's power play would not be completely satisfied with this book's emphasis on the power of political discourses. If political discourses provide elites with such an important source of legitimacy, then how can we account for the frequently used repressive practices in Cambodia's politics? The legitimating power of discourses pales in comparison to the raw power and fear the ruling elites wield and in fact depend on in Cambodia's politics. But the linkage between power play and political discourses is not clear in this book. Despite such limitation, this book achieves its aim of exposing how Cambodian political elites articulated their competing political identities out of their own imaginings. Overall, this book offers an excellent example of discourse analysis and will be a good reference on Cambodia's domestic politics for years to come.

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