

The political evolutionary process of the Cambodian People's Party from 2008 to 2017: A critical review

Putheara Dy¹, Touch Sok², Peou Yang³, Dina Pen⁴, Vatheana Nut⁵

¹Royal University of Law and Economics, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

^{2,3}Royal Academy of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

^{4,5}Svay Rieng University, Svay Rieng Province, Cambodia

Article Info

Article history

Received: April 30, 2024

Revised: November 25, 2024

Accepted: December 02, 2024

Keywords

Cambodian People's Party

Critical review

Political evolution

Popularity

Qualitative descriptive design

Article type

Research article

Abstract

This study examines the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), originally founded in 1951 as the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), and traces its political development from 2008 to 2017. It explores the factors that have contributed to the CPP's political resilience, including its surge in popularity in 2008 and the decline it experienced by 2017. The research highlights the party's organizational strengths, patronage networks, and its use of coercive tactics to maintain power. It also looks at the role of socio-economic policies and national stability in the party's success. However, by 2017, the CPP faced growing challenges, particularly from a politically aware youth and dissatisfaction with its increasing authoritarianism, media suppression, and restrictions on opposition. Using a qualitative, descriptive approach, the study draws on secondary sources like academic articles, NGO reports, and media coverage. The findings suggest that while the CPP has managed to maintain its hold on power, its reliance on authoritarian methods may not be sustainable. The study concludes with recommendations for improving governance, encouraging political competition, engaging the youth, and strengthening democratic institutions in Cambodia. Future research could explore the CPP's post-2017 strategies, the role of digital media in youth political engagement, or the long-term impacts of its socio-economic policies on governance and public trust in Cambodia.

This is an open-access article under the [CC BY-SA](#) license.



Corresponding author

Dina Pen

Svay Rieng University, Svay Rieng, Cambodia

Email: pendina.sru.edu.kh@gmail.com

1. Introduction

1.1. Background information

Under French colonial rule from 1863, the Kingdom of Cambodia gained independence in 1953. During King Sisowath's reign, a Royal Decree in March 1913 established a 39-member Consultative Assembly representing 10 provinces (Pen et al., 2024). Cambodia's political history before French colonization in 1863 was characterized by weak leadership and dependence on stronger neighbors like Siam (Thailand) and Vietnam for protection (Chandler & Overton, 2024). In 1946, the first Cambodian Electoral Act allowed the formation of political parties, leading to the establishment of three political entities (Chandler, 2008).

Cambodia's trajectory has been marked by phases of peace, conflict, and reconstruction. Following a period of relative stability from 1953 to 1970, the country endured wars, genocide, foreign occupation, and economic embargoes from 1970 until the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991. The post-1993 period saw Cambodia rebuild itself with international aid, transitioning into a "quasi-democracy" marked by notable but uneven economic growth and social development (L. Un & Sok, 2018).

Since the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia has undergone major transformations: from civil war to reconstruction, from socialism to a multiparty system, and from a planned economy to a market economy. The CPP's one-party rule ended with the 1993 elections, ushering in a multiparty system although the CPP continued to dominate political life. Scholars argue that this dominance has limited civil and political rights and weakened institutional accountability, while the CPP's power relies on balancing repression, co-optation, and legitimization strategies (Croissant & Lorenz, 2018). The CPP's control has also been bolstered by Hun Sen's ability to maintain elite loyalty through economic incentives, which reduces the need for overt repression and limits international pressure.

Since 1979, the CPP has remained the country's dominant political force (FreedomHouse, 2024). In 2017, the Supreme Court, heavily influenced by the CPP, softened the main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), followed by further restrictions on independent media, criminalization of dissent, and the establishment of state-controlled media (Lamb et al., 2018). Despite facing economic and political challenges, the CPP has maintained control through strategic responses to both domestic opposition and international scrutiny (Bektimirova, 2023).

1.2. Statement of the problems

Cambodia's political landscape is dominated by the CPP, which has growing authoritarian tendencies. This study explores the CPP's political strategies and adaptations from 2008 to 2017, a period marked by increasing challenges to its authority, including a younger, politically aware electorate and opposition movements (Peou, 2020).

1.3. Research gap

While much research addresses the CPP's electoral strategies, there is limited analysis of its political evolution and popularity shifts between 2008 and 2017. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the CPP's resilience, key strategies, and shifts in public perception during this critical period.

1.4. Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the strengths contributing to the CPP's resilience in Cambodian politics.
2. To analyze the factors that led to the CPP's increased popularity in 2008.
3. To investigate the reasons behind the CPP's decline in popularity in 2017.

1.5. Research questions

The following questions guide the investigation.

1. What were the key strengths of the CPP during the specified period?
2. What factors contributed to the increase in the CPP's popularity in 2008?
3. What led to the decline in the CPP's popularity in 2017?

1.6. Significance of the study

This study offers insights into the CPP's political evolution, contributing to a deeper understanding of its governance strategies and public perception. Findings can inform policymakers and analysts about Cambodia's relationship between governance, public perception, and political legitimacy.

2. Literature Review

This literature review critically evaluates and synthesizes existing research on the Cambodian People's Party's (CPP) political evolution from 2008 to 2017. Understanding previous research establishes a foundation for analyzing CPP's strengths, shifts in popularity, and governance strategies.

2.1. Political evolution and consolidation of power (2008-2017)

The CPP's political trajectory from 2008 to 2017 reflects a consolidation of authoritarian power under Prime Minister Hun Sen. This period saw intensified suppression of opposition, media, and civil society, signaling a shift from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism. The death of CPP President Chea Sim in 2015 removed internal constraints on Hun Sen, allowing greater personal control over the party (Sutton, 2018). The CPP's crackdown on the opposition intensified after the 2017 local elections, targeting the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) and independent media (Croissant, 2018). The CPP's actions led to a transformation of Cambodia's political landscape, with the regime increasingly resembling a patrimonial dictatorship (Croissant, 2018). By 2018, the CPP conducted a sham election that further solidified its grip on power while maintaining a facade of democratic processes (Morgenbesser, 2019).

2.2. Regime durability and role of coercion

The CPP's durability is attributed to a coercion-dominant coalition, where state and economic elites collaborated to suppress dissent and maintain control. This coalition prioritized repression over reform, marginalizing the majority of Cambodians from political and economic benefits (Loughlin, 2019).

Patron-client networks have been crucial, allowing the regime to extract rents from public goods while co-opting potential challengers and thus maintaining political stability (Young, 2021). The CPP's durability is attributed to its coercion-dominant coalition, which integrates state security forces and economic elites, ensuring a tight grip on power despite electoral challenges (Loughlin, 2019).

2.3. Electoral strategy and consolidation (2008-2017)

The CPP's dominance from 2008 to 2017 highlights its strategy of securing power through electoral manipulation, economic patronage, and suppression of opposition. The CPP has historically employed a mix of elite and mass clientelism to maintain control, particularly through the distribution of resources to secure electoral support (Loughlin, 2020). Despite this,

the party's reliance on coercion has increased, especially following the 2013 elections, where popular opposition surged, prompting a crackdown on dissent (Loughlin, 2019).

Cambodia's fourth national elections were held on July 27, following the 1991 conflict. In 2007, the National Electoral Committee removed 586,160 names from the voter list due to death, duplication, and other reasons. The list was publicly displayed for 35 days, allowing citizens to contest the deletions, and according to a U.S. Embassy report, most protests resulted in reinstatement (Thayer, 2009).

The CPP achieved a decisive victory in the 2008 election, bolstered by: control over local authorities, which facilitated vote delivery; marginalization of opposition parties, limiting their electoral impact; economic patronage stemming from a boom; enhancing public support; and exploitation of nationalistic sentiments related to a border dispute with Thailand (Hughes, 2009).

Cambodia has achieved substantial economic growth, with annual rates in the double digits over recent years. This impressive economic expansion, coupled with political stability, provides the country with significant opportunities to strengthen and renew its social sector (Chet, 2009).

2.4. Increasing authoritarianism (2013-2017)

By 2017, the CPP intensified its crackdown on civil society, independent media, and political opposition, effectively dismantling the remnants of a competitive political landscape (Croissant, 2018; Morgenbesser, 2019). The CPP's attempts with China strengthened, providing economic support that reduced reliance on Western powers, further entrenching its authoritarian rules (Croissant, 2018).

Cambodia made global headlines in November 2017 when the Supreme Court, dominated by judges linked to the ruling CPP, dissolved the main opposition party. This led to legal reforms, the closure of independent media, the criminalization of activists, the creation of state-controlled social media, and broader geopolitical shifts that supported authoritarian rule, setting the stage for a crackdown (Lamb et al., 2018).

2.5. Transition to Hegemonic Authoritarianism

The political environment shifted from competitive authoritarianism to hegemonic authoritarianism, with the CPP maintaining power through sham elections and the suppression of dissent (Peou, 2011; Morgenbesser, 2019).

Cambodia, under Prime Minister Hun Sen, has become increasingly authoritarian, resulting in a hegemonic party system where the opposition is too weak to challenge the ruling CPP. Despite the country's democratic transition beginning in 1991 with the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements, Cambodia's democracy remains unconsolidated. The first national elections in 1993 led to a coalition government and a liberal constitution. However, the CPP has since gained overwhelming control over the electoral system, legislature, and judiciary, with little to no checks and balances remaining in the government (Peou, 2011).

While the CPP's consolidation of power has led to a more authoritarian regime, some scholars argue that the historical context of political transitions in Cambodia suggests potential for future democratic movements, albeit under challenging circumstances (Roberts, 2003).

2.6. Historical context and emergence of the CPP

The CPP traces its origins back to 1951 (Vickery, 1994; DBpedia, n.d.; Cheunboran, 2019) when the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) was founded. They aimed to preserve a connection to this early organization while distancing themselves from Democratic Kampuchea's party, which was founded in 1960. For Democratic Kampuchea (DK), that 1960 congress marked the party's founding, but the PRPK saw it as the second congress in its history (Vickery, 1994).

According to DBpedia (n.d.) and Em et al. (2024), the CPP has governed Cambodia since 1979. Initiated in 1951 as the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party KPRP, it initially aligned with Vietnam and the Soviet Union, contrasting with Pol Pot's pro-Chinese faction. After helping topple the Khmer Rouge, the CPP ruled the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–1989), and later the State of Cambodia (1989–1991). In 1991, the CPP dropped socialism, adopting a mixed economy and conservative authoritarianism. Now, it is affiliated with the Centrist Democrat International along with European center-right parties.

The CPP's origins date back to the Khmer Rouge period and the Vietnamese-backed ousting of the Pol Pot regime in 1979. Originally called the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea, the party was renamed the CPP in the 1990s as it worked to legitimize its authority in the post-Cold War period (Chandler, 2008). During the early years, the CPP operated within a fragile political environment, characterized by internal conflicts and external pressures, particularly from Western nations advocating for democratic reforms. The CPP evolved within a politically volatile environment, balancing internal conflicts and external pressures, especially from Western pro-democracy advocates (Vickery, 1994).

2.7. Implications and sustainability of CPP's authoritarian model

The CPP's shift towards repression over reform has been a response to rising contestation, indicating a strategic retreat from competitive authoritarianism to a more overtly authoritarian regime (Loughlin, 2020; Croissant & Lorenz, 2018). This reliance on coercion raises questions about the sustainability of the CPP's governance model, particularly in the face of potential international pressures and internal dissent (Strangio, 2014).

The CPP's win in the 2008 elections secured 90 parliamentary seats, strengthened by its control over local authorities and economic patronage (Hughes, 2009; Sok, 2016). Since the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, Cambodia has been largely ruled by the CPP, which increased its vote share and parliamentary seats over time: 41% (64 seats) in 1998, 47% (73 seats) in 2003, and 58% (90 seats) in 2008 (Sok, 2016).

The CPP secured legislative control in 2008 due to four factors: control over local authorities, marginalization of the opposition, economic patronage from a boom, and exploitation of a border dispute with Thailand (Hughes, 2009). The party exploited nationalistic sentiments, particularly regarding border disputes with Thailand, to rally support and distract from governance issues (Hughes, 2009).

3. Methodology

This section describes the methodological approach used to investigate the CPP from 2008 to 2017, focusing on its political strengths, factors contributing to its popularity in 2008, and reasons for its decline by 2017. A qualitative, descriptive design was employed to gain a

comprehensive understanding of the CPP's governance strategies, socio-economic policies, and shifts in public perception.

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design, which is appropriate for exploring complex political phenomena. By focusing on secondary data, the research examines how the CPP sustained its dominance and responded to shifting political challenges. A descriptive approach was chosen to systematically document the patterns and themes of the CPP's political strategies, particularly its popularity surges and declines.

The thematic analysis used in this study enables a synthesis of existing literature to identify recurring themes in the CPP's political trajectory. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the interrelated factors contributing to the CPP's resilience and the growing political awareness among the Cambodian electorate.

3.2. Secondary data sources

This research relies on secondary data drawn from various sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the CPP's strategies and public perception. The sources include:

Academic literature: peer-reviewed journal articles and books discussing Cambodian politics, the CPP's governance, and the socio-political dynamics in Cambodia. These sources provide insights into the CPP's historical context, electoral strategies, and responses to political challenges.

NGO and government reports: reports from organizations like Freedom House and the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia provide data on political processes, electoral outcomes, and governance challenges. These reports help illustrate external perspectives on the CPP's political evolution and the responses from international observers.

News and Media Archives: Media sources, such as news articles and press releases, provide detailed accounts of major political events, including the CPP's 2008 electoral success and the 2017 crackdown on the opposition. These sources capture public reactions and offer context on the CPP's socio-economic policies and authoritarian practices.

3.3. Selection criteria

To ensure relevance and rigor, sources were selected based on the following criteria: Relevance to the CPP's political evolution: Priority was given to literature and reports that focus specifically on the CPP's strategies, electoral dynamics, and socio-economic policies. Date of publication: Sources published between 2008 and 2023 were prioritized to provide a current understanding of the period in question. Credibility and academic rigor: emphasis was placed on peer-reviewed articles, government and NGO reports, and reputable news sources to maintain data accuracy and reliability.

3.4. Data analysis

The study uses thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes across the collected literature, focusing on factors that contributed to the CPP's strengths, shifts in popularity, and eventual

decline in 2017. This approach involved coding, categorization, and synthesis of data to construct a cohesive narrative of the CPP's political strategies and public perception.

3.5. Coding and categorization

Initial coding: Key statements, themes, and insights from each source were identified and coded based on relevance to the research questions. Codes included aspects such as organizational strengths, grassroots mobilization, economic policies, youth engagement, and authoritarian measures.

Categorization: Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, such as CPP's strengths, factors driving popularity in 2008, reasons for decline in 2017, and sustainability of authoritarianism. These categories reflect the primary aspects of the CPP's evolution and highlight the complex dynamics influencing its political resilience.

Thematic Synthesis: The categories were synthesized into major themes, allowing for a clear narrative that connects the CPP's strategic maneuvers with shifts in public perception.

3.6. Key thematic areas

The analysis focuses on the following five thematic areas:

Organizational strengths: examines the CPP's internal structure, local engagement, and effective governance, which have contributed to its political resilience.

Socio-economic policies: analyzes the role of economic growth, infrastructure development, and patronage networks in bolstering the CPP's popularity, particularly during the 2008 elections.

Electoral strategies: Investigates the CPP's use of patronage, clientelism, and control over electoral processes to secure public support and marginalize opposition.

Youth political awareness: explores the impact of a politically active and younger electorate, particularly in challenging the CPP's long-standing dominance by 2017.

Authoritarian shift: Analyzes the CPP's transition from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism, with a focus on media control, suppression of dissent, and dissolution of opposition.

3.7. Limitations of the study

This study's reliance on secondary data limits direct insights into Cambodian public sentiment and the CPP's internal decision-making. Potential biases resulting from international reports and media coverage influenced by external perspectives are mitigated by cross-referencing multiple sources. Additionally, the study's focus on 2008–2017 restricts applicability to more recent developments in the CPP's governance model.

3.8. Ethical consideration

This research uses publicly accessible secondary sources, ensuring full compliance with ethical standards. Proper attribution is given to all referenced sources, and findings are presented

objectively to avoid misrepresentation. An impartial approach is maintained, particularly when discussing politically sensitive issues, to provide a balanced interpretation of the CPP's evolution.

4. Findings

This section explores the key strengths of the CPP during the specified period, factors contributing to its popularity surge in 2008, and the primary reasons for its popularity decline by 2017.

4.1. Strengths of the CPP

Strong organizational structure: The CPP's evolution from a liberation movement has fostered a robust party identity, creating enduring partisan loyalties among its leadership. The party has established a hierarchical structure that facilitates effective communication and mobilization at local levels, ensuring a strong grassroots presence (Luo & Un, 2022). The analysis identifies several key strengths that have contributed to the CPP's political resilience. The CPP's strong organizational structure and effective governance emerged as primary factors, with participants noting the party's ability to mobilize grassroots support and maintain a robust presence in local communities as a significant strength (Cheunboran, 2019). Additionally, the CPP's focus on economic development and infrastructure projects resonated with voters, reinforcing its legitimacy and authority.

Patron-Client Networks: The CPP has effectively utilized patron-client networks to maintain power, allowing for the extraction of resources and distribution of benefits to loyal constituents. This system not only secures political support but also enables the party to co-opt potential challengers, thereby minimizing opposition (Young, 2021).

Coercive Strategies: The CPP has employed coercive measures to suppress dissent and maintain control, particularly in response to electoral challenges. The party's ability to navigate political threats through repression has reinforced its dominance, allowing it to disregard electoral outcomes when necessary (Loughlin, 2019).

Political Transformations: According to Cheunboran, (2019), the CPP has maintained a strong historical continuity by remaining loyal to the late King-Father Norodom Sihanouk and upholding the Cambodian monarchy. The party has also undergone three significant political transformations: 1) The adoption of a free-market economy and liberal plural democracy, which facilitated political competition through elections starting in 1993. 2) The CPP played a key role in establishing lasting peace and national reconciliation in Cambodia, with its "Win-Win Policy" bringing an end to the civil war. 3) The CPP has consistently advocated for neutrality, regional integration, and international engagement.

While the CPP's strengths are evident, it is important to consider the potential for emerging opposition movements. Recent years have seen increased grassroots activism and calls for reform, which may challenge the CPP's long-standing grip on power, indicating a dynamic political landscape that could evolve in response to public sentiment.

4.2. Factors contributing to popularity in 2008

In 2008, the CPP saw a significant increase in popularity, largely driven by its successful economic policies and well-executed electoral campaigns. The government's focus on infrastructure development and attracting foreign investment were key factors that earned the support of the public (Thayer, 2015).

Historical Dominance: The CPP has a long-standing presence in Cambodian politics, having been established during the Khmer Rouge era and evolving through various political landscapes since the 1993 elections (Strangio, 2014). Its control over state resources, including the judiciary and security apparatus, has facilitated its ability to suppress opposition and maintain power (K. Un, 2015). The party's ability to adapt to political challenges, such as the rise of the opposition, has been crucial. For instance, it has engaged in political compromises to quell dissent (K. Un, 2015). Conversely, the emergence of a younger, more educated electorate poses a challenge to the CPP's popularity, as this demographic increasingly demands transparency and accountability from their leaders (Eng & Hughes, 2017). The Paris Peace Agreements in 1991 aimed to establish a multiparty democracy, but the political landscape quickly shifted towards a hegemonic party system dominated by the CPP (Shen, 2023).

Socio-Economic Policies: Economic growth and infrastructural development have bolstered the CPP's image, as many citizens associate the party with stability and progress (Eng & Hughes, 2017). The distribution of resources and benefits, particularly in rural areas, has helped maintain loyalty among constituents despite criticisms of corruption and authoritarianism (Strangio, 2014). The CPP's promises of continued economic growth and stability, especially during uncertain times, helped solidify its position as the preferred choice for voters who saw the party as the best option to ensure ongoing progress and development. This combination of historical influence, strategic political moves, and effective socio-economic policies has allowed the CPP to maintain a stronghold in Cambodian politics despite facing new challenges (Thayer, 2015).

4.3. Factors leading to a decline in popularity in 2017

The decline in the CPP's popularity from 2008 to 2017 can be attributed to several interrelated factors, including increased political awareness, the emergence of a youthful electorate, and the party's authoritarian tendencies. These elements collectively contributed to a growing discontent among the populace, particularly among younger voters.

By 2017, the CPP faced significant challenges that led to a decline in its popularity. Participants expressed concerns regarding governance issues, allegations of corruption, and a perceived lack of responsiveness to public grievances. The crackdown on opposition movements and the suppression of dissent were also noted as factors that eroded public trust in the CPP (Peou, 2020). The emergence of a more politically active and vocal citizenry, particularly among the youth, indicated a shift in public sentiment that the CPP struggled to address.

The evolution of interparty and intraparty factionalism in Cambodian politics, especially since the 1990s, also played a role. Historical conflicts and power dynamics among political elites, including divisions within the CPP and FUNCINPEC, have impacted political stability (Peou, 2020). The transition from a multiparty to a

dominant one-party system led to internal competition and division within the CPP, affecting its cohesion and stability.

Increase Political Awareness: The CPP's governance style, characterized by a patronage system, has led to a rise in political activism and awareness among citizens, particularly through community-based organizations. The emergence of a united opposition, notably the Cambodian National Rescue Party, has galvanized public sentiment against the CPP (K. Un, 2020).

Youthful Electorate: A significant demographic shift occurred, with a younger, more educated electorate that aspires to better governance and economic opportunities (Eng & Hughes, 2017). This generation, having experienced relative peace and economic growth, has different expectations compared to older generations, leading to increased dissatisfaction with the CPP's performance (Eng & Hughes, 2017).

Authoritarian Shift: The CPP's return to authoritarianism, marked by intensified repression of media and opposition, alienated many voters (Croissant, 2018). Despite economic growth, the lack of institutional improvement and social justice further fueled public discontent (Croissant, 2018). The violent removal of Norodom Ranariddh in 1997 marked a critical turning point, leading to the consolidation of power within the CPP and diminishing the role of FUNCINPEC (Peou, 2020).

Intraparty Dynamics: The CPP has experienced internal divisions, with factions vying for control, which can lead to instability and affect electoral outcomes (Peou, 2020). The CPP has experienced internal divisions, with factions vying for control, which can lead to instability and affect electoral outcomes (Peou, 2014).

Conversely, while the CPP faced declining popularity, it maintained a strong grip on power through coercive measures and patronage, suggesting that the decline may not lead to immediate political change. The party's ability to adapt and suppress dissent remains a critical factor in its continued dominance.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the political evolution of the CPP from 2008 to 2017, focusing on its strengths, the factors behind its surge in popularity in 2008, and the reasons for its decline by 2017. The findings highlight a complex interplay of organizational strength, socio-economic policies, and authoritarian shifts that shaped the party's dominance and vulnerability during this period.

5.1. Organizational strengths and governance

The CPP's enduring organizational strength was one of the central factors contributing to its resilience. The party's ability to maintain a hierarchical structure that effectively mobilized grassroots support allowed it to consolidate power even amid external challenges. The CPP's strategic use of patron-client networks helped secure loyalty from local communities and distribute resources, ensuring continued political support despite criticisms of corruption. As noted by Cheunboran (2019), the CPP's historical continuity, including its loyalty to the late King-Father Norodom Sihanouk and its role in maintaining the monarchy, further strengthened its legitimacy.

The findings also corroborate previous research suggesting that the CPP's dominance relied not only on traditional political tools but also on the active suppression of opposition movements. The party's coercive strategies, such as limiting media freedoms and repressing dissent, played a significant role in ensuring the CPP's grip on power, particularly during periods when electoral challenges arose. While these measures were successful in the short term, they also contributed to growing discontent among younger, politically aware voters, who increasingly saw the regime's tactics as incompatible with democratic principles (Peou, 2020).

5.2. Popularity surge in 2008

The period leading up to the 2008 elections marked a significant surge in the CPP's popularity. The party capitalized on economic growth, infrastructure development, and the attraction of foreign investment to strengthen its appeal, especially among rural voters. The economic boom helped improve living conditions in certain areas, increasing public support for the regime. As highlighted in the findings, the party's promises of continued economic growth and stability during a time of uncertainty resonated strongly with voters (Thayer, 2015).

The CPP's historical dominance also played a crucial role in its success during this period. The control over state resources, including the judiciary and security apparatus, allowed the party to suppress opposition and ensure favorable electoral outcomes (K. Un, 2015). However, this dominance came at the cost of democratic principles, as the political landscape shifted toward a hegemonic party system rather than a truly competitive multiparty democracy. The exploitation of nationalistic sentiments surrounding the border dispute with Thailand further helped the CPP rally support, distract from governance issues, and position itself as the defender of national sovereignty in Thailand (Hughes, 2009).

5.3. Decline in popularity by 2017

The decline in the CPP's popularity by 2017 was multifaceted, with several interrelated factors contributing to the erosion of public trust. The emergence of a younger, more educated electorate, which increasingly demanded transparency, accountability, and social justice, posed a significant challenge to the party. As noted in the findings, this demographic shift led to a growing disillusionment with the CPP, particularly as younger voters began to question the party's ability to deliver meaningful reforms and political freedoms (Eng & Hughes, 2017).

Moreover, the CPP's authoritarian shift, marked by the dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) and the further suppression of dissent, alienated many voters who once supported the regime. The findings underscore that the crackdown on opposition movements, independent media, and civil society was a critical factor in the decline of the CPP's popularity (Croissant, 2018). While the party retained its power through coercion and patronage, its ability to suppress opposition began to erode its legitimacy, particularly among the more politically active youth (Peou, 2020).

In addition, the internal divisions within the CPP, as factions vied for control, contributed to instability within the party. These divisions impacted the party's cohesion and were perceived by the public as a sign of weakening leadership, further diminishing trust in the regime. As seen in previous studies, internal power struggles, such as those between the CPP and FUNCINPEC, have long been a feature of Cambodia's political landscape, with these tensions often spilling into the public sphere (Peou, 2020).

5.4. Sustainability of the CPP's authoritarian model

While the CPP's authoritarian model of governance has been successful in maintaining its hold on power, questions regarding the sustainability of this model persist. The party's reliance on coercion and patronage rather than meaningful democratic reforms suggests that its current political model may be difficult to sustain in the long term, particularly given the increasing political awareness of the electorate and the growing calls for democratic reforms.

The CPP's ability to suppress dissent through coercive measures may provide short-term stability, but this strategy risks alienating future generations who are increasingly disillusioned with the lack of political freedoms and the absence of institutional checks and balances. As highlighted by Strangio (2014), the authoritarian model employed by the CPP is not immune to the pressures of internal dissent and international scrutiny, particularly as Cambodia's younger generations become more politically engaged and critical of the regime's tactics.

In conclusion, the CPP's ability to maintain political dominance over the past decade has been shaped by its organizational strengths, strategic electoral policies, and coercive strategies. However, the evolving political landscape, characterized by a younger and more politically aware electorate, internal divisions within the party, and increased international scrutiny, may present significant challenges to the sustainability of the CPP's authoritarian model in the years to come.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

6.1. Conclusion

This study explored the political evolution of the CPP from 2008 to 2017, focusing on its strengths, factors behind its surge in popularity in 2008, and reasons for its decline by 2017. The CPP's ability to sustain power during this period was largely due to a combination of organizational strengths, effective patronage networks, and coercive strategies that helped maintain political control. The party's dominance was bolstered by a strong grassroots presence, control over state resources, and a historical legacy that appealed to segments of the electorate.

The 2008 surge in popularity can be attributed to the CPP's successful economic policies, infrastructure development, and its focus on national stability and growth, which resonated particularly with rural voters. However, by 2017, the CPP faced challenges stemming from an increasingly politically aware electorate, particularly the youth, who demanded greater political freedoms and accountability. Additionally, the CPP's authoritarian turn, marked by the suppression of opposition movements, media freedoms, and civil society, contributed to a decline in its legitimacy and popular support.

Despite these challenges, the CPP retained control through its ability to suppress dissent and manipulate electoral processes. However, this reliance on coercion raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of its governance model. The findings suggest that while the CPP's power may persist in the short term, growing internal divisions, a more politically engaged youth, and increasing international scrutiny may threaten the party's dominance in the future.

6.2. Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are offered to the CPP, the Cambodian government, and other stakeholders in the political landscape to address the challenges identified and improve the country's political system.

Promote Political Pluralism: To enhance democratic legitimacy, the CPP should encourage a more open political environment by allowing opposition parties to function freely. Electoral reforms should be introduced to ensure fair and transparent elections, reducing political interference and promoting competition.

Increase transparency and accountability: The CPP must tackle corruption and improve governance by establishing independent anti-corruption bodies and ensuring transparency in the allocation of state resources. This will help rebuild public trust and strengthen the party's credibility.

Engage with the Youth: The CPP should prioritize engaging young Cambodians in policy-making by creating platforms for youth participation. Addressing their needs through education, job creation, and social mobility policies will help bridge the gap between the government and the younger electorate.

Focus on Inclusive Economic Growth: To reduce inequality, the CPP should focus on policies that ensure economic growth benefits all segments of society, particularly rural and marginalized communities. Investments in infrastructure, education, and job creation will foster a more inclusive economy.

Respect Human Rights and Political Freedoms: The CPP should uphold fundamental freedoms such as speech, press, and assembly. Lifting restrictions on independent media and allowing greater political freedom will help strengthen Cambodia's democratic institutions and improve the public's confidence in the political system.

Improve Internal Party Cohesion: The CPP should strengthen internal democracy by promoting transparent, merit-based leadership transitions and reducing factionalism. This will improve the party's stability and ensure a more unified approach to governance.

Acknowledgments

This article was reviewed and provided feedback by double-blind peer reviewers, and after revision and acceptance, the article was then edited by the CJESS's editors. Nevertheless, the authors would profoundly express our gratitude and thanks to these individuals and CJESS for making this article appear in the scholarly world. Without their contributions, this article would not have appeared in academic articles. Therefore, their contributions are considered invaluable and helpful for the whole society, especially the scholar society of research and publication.

Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of AI usage

The author(s) used ChatGPT and QuillBot to polish the language in some parts of the article. However, they declared that the content of the article is totally theirs.

References

- Bektimirova, N. N. (2023). The electoral strategy of the Cambodian People's Party: The influence of external and internal factors. *Yugo-Vostochnaya Aziya: Aktual'nyye Problemy Razvitiya*, 1(58), 156–166. <https://doi.org/10.31696/2072-8271-2023-1-1-58-156-166>
- Chandler, D. P. (2008). *A history of Cambodia* (4th ed.). Westview Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429495519>
- Chandler, D. P., & Overton, L. C. (2024). *Cambodia*. Encyclopedia Britannica. www.britannica.com/place/Cambodia
- Chet, C. (2009). Higher education in Cambodia. In Y. Hirosato & Y. Kitamura (Eds.), *The political economy of educational reforms and capacity development in Southeast Asia* (pp. 153–165). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9377-7_10
- Cheunboran, C. (2019). *The Cambodian People's Party: History and Political Transformation*. AVI Perspective. Unpublished manuscript.
- Croissant, A. (2018). Cambodia in 2017: Descending into dictatorship? *Asian Survey*, 58(1), 194–200. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2018.58.1.194>
- Croissant, A., & Lorenz, P. (2018). Cambodia: From UN-led peace-building to post-genocidal authoritarianism. In A. Croissant (Ed.), *Post-genocidal regimes* (pp. 35–69). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68182-5_3
- DBpedia. (n.d.). *About: Cambodian People's Party*. https://dbpedia.org/page/Cambodian_People's_Party
- Deth, S. U., & Bultmann, D. (2016). The afterglow of Hun Sen's Cambodia? Socioeconomic development, political change, and the persistence of inequalities. In C. Banpasirichote Wungaeo, B. Rehbein, & S. Wun'gaeo (Eds.), *Globalization and democracy in Southeast Asia: Challenges, responses and alternative futures* (pp. 87–109). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57654-5_5
- Em, S., Mok, S., Sam, R., Febri Kurniawan, G., & Pen, D. (2024). History of education in Cambodia: A review of literature from past to present. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4901095>
- Eng, N., & Hughes, C. (2017). Coming of age in peace, prosperity, and connectivity: Cambodia's young electorate and its impact on the ruling party's political strategies. *Critical Asian Studies*, 49(3), 396–410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2017.1341185>
- FreedomHouse. (2024). *Cambodia*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/cambodia/freedom-world/2022>
- Hughes, C. (2009). *In the midst of a crisis*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Lamb, V., Schoenberger, L., & Beban, A. (2018). Authoritarian rule shedding its populist skin: How the loss of independent media in the 2017 crackdown shapes rural politics in Cambodia. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 18(1), 70–85. <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/16284>
- Loughlin, N. (2019). *Authoritarian regime durability: An analysis of Cambodia's coercion-dominant winning coalition*. University of London. <https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00032271>
- Loughlin, N. (2020). Reassessing Cambodia's patronage system(s) and the end of competitive authoritarianism: electoral clientelism in the shadow of coercion. *Pacific Affairs*, 93(3), 497–518. <https://doi.org/10.5509/2020933497>
- Luo, J., & Un, K. (2022). Organizational strength and authoritarian durability in Cambodia. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 55(4), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1525/cpcs.2022.1627857>

- Morgenbesser, L. (2019). Cambodia's transition to hegemonic authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(1), 158–171. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0012>
- Pen, D., Dy, P., Ros, R., Em, S., & Nut, V. (2024). The role of women in political participation in Cambodia: A case study of Svay Rieng Province. *Journal of Politics and Gender Studies*, 3(2), 203–220. <https://doi.org/10.58421/misro.v3i2.247>
- Peou, S. (2011). Cambodia: A hegemonic party system in the making. In L. F. Lye & W. Hofmeister (Eds.), *Political parties, party systems, and democratization in East Asia* (pp. 79–105). East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814327954_0004
- Peou, S. (2014). Party and party system institutionalization in Cambodia. In A. Hicken & E. M. Kuhonta (Eds.), *Party system institutionalization in Asia* (pp. 212–235). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107300385.009>
- Peou, S. (2020). Interparty and intraparty factionalism in Cambodian politics. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 39(1), 17–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420906023>
- Roberts, D. (2003). From communism to democracy in Cambodia: A decade of transition and beyond. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 36(2), 245–258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0967-067x\(03\)00028-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0967-067x(03)00028-x)
- Shen, K. (2023). Planting seeds but bearing different fruit. In R. M. Howard, K. A. Randazzo, & R. A. Reid (Eds.), *Research handbook on law and political systems* (pp. 99–121). Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800378346.00012>
- Strangio, S. (2014). *Hun Sen's Cambodia*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300210149>
- Sutton, J. (2018). Hun Sen's consolidation of personal rule and the closure of political space in Cambodia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 40(2), 173–195. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs40-2a>
- Thayer, C. A. (2009). Cambodia: The Cambodian People's Party consolidates power. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2009(1), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1355/seaa09f>
- Thayer, C. A. (2009). Cambodia: The Cambodian People's Party consolidates power. *Southeast Asian Affairs*. In D. Singh (Ed.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2009* (pp. 85–102). ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812309471>
- Un, K. (2015). The Cambodian people have spoken: Has the Cambodian People's Party heard? *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2015(1), 102–116. <https://doi.org/10.1355/aa15-1f>
- Un, K. (2019). *Cambodia: Return to authoritarianism*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108558648>
- Un, L., & Sok, S. (2018). Higher education systems and institutions, Cambodia. In P. Teixeira & J. Shin (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of international higher education systems and institutions* (pp. 1–10). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_500-1
- Vickery, M. (1994). The Cambodian People's Party: Where has it come from, where is it going? *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 21, 102–117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27912097>
- Young, S. (2021). The dynamics of political durability in Cambodia's ruling regime. In S. Young (Ed.), *Strategies of authoritarian survival and dissensus in Southeast Asia* (pp. 21–43). Palgrave Series in Asia and Pacific Studies. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-6112-6_2