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Civil Societies based on Clientship:

A Challenge to Democracy?

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According to Kevin Hewison and Garry Rodan¹, a Tocquevillean view of civil society dominates analyses of Southeast Asian public spheres. In these analyses civil society is frequently seen as the natural and functional domain of individual and group freedom, contrasted with the state's coercive institutions and relationships. For Tocqueville associational life fuses order and liberty, as well as private interest and the common good. He envisages a civil society consisting of an array of organizations that hem in the state on every side, mobilizing distinct constituencies and lobbying in favor of diverse and particularistic interests. However, this liberal definition of civil society based on the assumption that individuals freely bond for limiting absolute rule cannot be exported to non-western contexts, despite the claim of its universality by western policy makers.

Civil society doesn't represent separate systems of independent logics². From an historical and cultural context to another the norms determining the ability of people to relate to one another may change. The distinction between public and private spheres may not always apply to Southeast Asian societies where kinship remains the cultural core of a wide range of institutions and voluntary associations. Moreover, "the liberal notion that political authority should respect the autonomy of civil society from which its legitimacy derives may also require qualification for some Southeast Asian societies, just as it may be a mistake to assume that civil society must be oppositional"³. Thus,

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authoritarian Asian regimes have for more than three decades encouraged the creation of what Michael Frolic has called *state-led civil societies*⁴, that is, social organizations and quasi-administrative units created as an adjunct to state power and designed for managing and monitoring the rapid evolution of economy and society. The prevalence of these social organizations in authoritarian regimes challenges the Western-centric approaches to the relationship between civil society and democracy. Hence the rejection by national leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew and Dr. Mahathir Mohammad of the Western-style model of democracy and their strong ideological advocacy in the 1990s for the concept of “Asian democratic systems“, whose main characteristics are communitarianism, authority, strong states, and longevity of ruling parties⁵, as well as personalism and patronage⁶. In the same vein, Thai intellectuals, such as Chai-Anan Samudavanija and Prawase Wasi have coined the concept of *elite civil society* which emphasizes partnership between social organizations and the state under the patronage of the elite⁷.

Significantly, most of Southeast Asia has no language equivalent of “public interest”, “civil” or “pluralism”. For instance, in the Thai recently forged compound for civil society, *prachaa sangkhom*, *prachaa* may be alternatively translated by “subjects” of a kingdom, “populace”, “people”, or “citizens”. It also appears that *sangkhum*, the Khmer equivalent to Thai *sangkhom*, only entered the Khmer language in the 1930s, via Pāli and Thai languages⁸. From this statement it can be inferred that the notion of civil society in Southeast Asia is not only new but can be interpreted in various and discordant ways.

Although the concept of civil society is a generic label that lumps together disparate and contradictory forms of organization and action, it remains however useful in helping to explore the social and political relations and configurations in national societies of the non-western world⁹. To preserve its analytical potential there is however the need to overstep the basic tension

between universalist and relativist approaches. As noted by Chris Hann, the "choice between universalism and relativism needs to be posed starkly and anthropologists can negotiate an intermediary path"¹⁰. This intermediary path implies to unravel the interplay of social structures and power, both being partly informed by the historical complexity of external factors and the socio-economic dynamics of the national society as a whole. Rather than stasis cultures are to be considered as "landscapes of struggle in which certain historical features are embedded"¹¹.

Here I want to briefly argue in favor of this approach by challenging some preconceptions about clientship as a normative pattern which prompt individuals to build vertical relationships in Buddhist societies of Southeast Asia. I shall compare two national contexts, namely Thailand and Cambodia. Their respective cultures share basically the same concepts and values concerning the regime of obligations that the patron and his clients should respect. However, the sharply contrastive evolution of these countries regarding the configuration of their civil society and the state management of popular contestation reveals that patron-clientelism as a basic bond system may accommodate a wide range of political forms and civic spaces. Against a current opinion, it is not an impediment to civic struggles and to local claim for an original path to democratization.

1. Patron-client relationships

In both Thai and Cambodian societies clientship cannot be interpreted separately from the senior - junior dyadic relationship whose codification it extends outside the family. The metaphorical use of basic kinship terms coupled with the tacit behavioral norms it triggers are the main linguistic and social idioms for building ties which are both integrative and hierarchical. The *phi-nong* compound, whose equivalent in Cambodian language is *bang-b'on*, is

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systematically resolved into reciprocal terms of address in situations when the interlocutors want to launch or to maintain an enduring, friendly and faithful relationship. Ideally, the *phi-nong/bang-b'on* are tied by mutual obligations. On the one hand, the junior by age or inferior by status should display marks of respect toward the senior/superior (*khaorop* in Thai ; *khorob* in Khmer). The junior should not act against the interests of the superior as a token of obedience (Thai : *chuafang* ; Khmer : *kasdap bangkoap*), of faithfulness and of tact for fear to hurting him (Thai : *krengcai*, Khmer : *klach*)¹². In return, the senior or patron should protect the junior or client (Thai : *saksit* ; Khmer : *kapie*). His duty is also to contribute to his social promotion and to help him financially (Thai: *chuailua* ; Khmer : *chumruny*). In both cultural contexts the ideological cement of the relationship rest on the Buddhist concept of *katanyu-katawethi* which means to remember and to return the service provided or the merits received as a token of gratitude¹³.

Keystone of the prime-education and normative bedrock of the relationships within the nuclear family, the kindred, the neighborhood or the village, the elder – younger relational pattern becomes a *habitus*, all the more powerfully incorporated by the individuals and generative of social practice that everybody is at the same time younger and older than others. Irreducible to a specific cultural institution but structuring them all, it extends far beyond the notion of *fait social total* conceptualized by Marcel Mauss, but should be more properly considered as a *global social mechanism*. Concerning the indigenous conception of what his own relation to the world should be, it leads to the common belief that without « string » or « connection » (Thai: *phueng* ; Khmer : *khsaer*), the individual is nobody and his/her life will be a failure.

However, from a context of interaction to another this global social mechanism varies in emotional intensity and its regime of mutual obligations may also fluctuate. The expectations and moral duties of the patrons and clients are adjusted to their social and spatial distance as well as to the economic gap

separating them. The more important is the difference of status, the less personal ties account in the relation and higher are the respect, the admiration and the fear of the patron's authority (Thai : *amnat* ; Khmer : *omnaich*), and of his coercive power (Thai : *kamlang* ; Khmer : *komlang*). In return, the less the relationship is strengthened by personal links and the more volatile are the individual and collective allegiances. In the literature clientship is often considered as an unbalanced relationship mainly benefiting the patron at the expense of clients entirely subjected to his rule. However, faithfulness doesn't necessarily means unwavering loyalty, even when the patron is believed to be a man of "great virtue" (Thai: *barami* ; Khmer : *boromei*) or is much-dreaded for his influence and coercive power. In many cases the Thai and Khmer, men and women, pull several "threads" at the same time. They are multi-connected to different alternative and sometimes concurrent networks for securing several sources of income, reducing unforeseen turns of events, and preventing the danger of tyranny. For example, in the present day Cambodia a large proportion of civil servants are officially adherents to the ruling Cambodian People Party (CPP), while being simultaneously and more discretely supporters of the main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party. In the same vein, many young Cambodian women working in the garment sector are at the same time affiliated to pro- and anti-CPP trade unions. In short, the individuals positioned as clients may be as much puppeteer as puppet, even though their latitude depends on their level of education, their economic situation and their ability to handle people. The more precarious their economic and social condition is, the more they are facing indebtedness and the more restricted is their latitude in the context of clientship, thus opening the door to human-trafficking, hyper-dependence and over-exploitation.

2. Clientship and the pattern of civil society

What lessons can be drawn from these observations? First, as a global social mechanism, patron-clientelism is the backbone of the whole range of organizations and informal forms of contracts in the Buddhist societies taken into consideration. In those contexts, the political system, the market and the civil society as a third sector are dominated by networks and complex patron-client ties. These ties entail a more or less powerful sense of obligation, reciprocity and moral indebtedness. In many respects, they are the functional equivalents of the values that form the backdrop to voluntary associations in the West. Second, patron-clientelism, individual freedom, critical reflection and civic consciousness are not mutually exclusive. All depends on the economic, social and political latitude let to individuals. In this respect, one helpful definition of civil society which has been used in Asian contexts¹⁴ is that “civil society is a mature form of critical reflection, which marks the transition from a ‘conventional orientation’ to fixed rules, unreflective duty and respect for authority to a ‘post conventional’ critical attitude towards identity construction”¹⁵.

This definition may take explicit account of the current processes of democratization for both Thailand and Cambodia. However, the civil societies of these two countries sharply differ because of historical contingencies and political factors. From the late 1960s to the early 1990s Thailand experienced some major economic and social transformations which led to a more class-stratified and urban society. During this period the country opened to the inflow of foreign capital and transformed progressively from an agriculture-oriented economy to one dominated by industrial and service activities. According to Kevin Hewison, “As the economic base expanded, a more complex division of labor demanded a greater range of human resource skills. This resulted in a Thai society that was far more diverse, and where economic power was firmly in the urbanized and increasingly internationalized private sector”¹⁶. During this

period the educated middle class enlarged widely its social basis. It also became more receptive to cosmopolitan values and more sensitive to social injustice. Such conditions were fertile ground for the emergence of social movements promoting human, women and worker rights. The political system changed consequently as well as the criteria defining legitimate power and good governance. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker¹⁷ or Kevin Hewison¹⁸ have pointed out that the military leaders lost rapidly their dominant role in politics when the big business, becoming more confident in its own strength, considered less necessary to share its profit with the generals. An important step in this process was the Chatichai civilian government. From 1988 to 1992, it promoted the parliamentary system and challenged the holistic notions of hierarchy, stability, unity, and statutory subordination promoted by the conservative state. The point of no return was reached in 1992 when, following a military takeover, a wide range of Bangkok's population massively rejected the return to the semi-democratic regime of the late 1970s and advocated for values such as competence, integrity, and honesty in government¹⁹. From then on, the tensions resulting from an increasing gap between small farmers facing impoverishment and urban white collars have partly overlapped the political divide between parliamentary and conservative forces, with the future of kingship and the megalomaniac ambition of Thaksin as backdrop stakes. In this context, political clientship ties reflect the general evolution of the society. The allegiances are more diversified, conditional and volatile. Moreover, grassroots social movements, forums or networks, united by the convergent interests of their adherents and which emphasize horizontal ties have emerged during the last three decades. Some of them rushed the government and gained a large audience through national protest by challenging development and environmental policies in Thailand, at the example of the Assembly of the Poor²⁰.

Whereas the 1970s-1990s were for Thailand a period of peace and rapid economic growth, they were for Cambodia one of the most chaotic phase of its modern political history. The country was torn apart by tragic years of civil war punctuated by the murderous rule of the Khmer Rouges. After centuries of precarious condition as a buffer state between its more powerful neighbours, namely Siam and Vietnam, it became the sacrificial victim of the bloody confrontation between the Western and the Communist blocs. After centuries of vassalage, Cambodia shifted after the peace-agreement of 1991 and the brief UNTAC period toward international aid-dependence which weakened its institutional capacity, undermined accountability and encouraged rent-seeking and corruption among the political elite²¹. Following its triple transition from war to peace, from communism to electoral democracy, and from command economy to free market, the results of political and economic development have been mixed in the case of Cambodia²². At the political level “while democratic participation has been expanded widely, democracy has failed to ‘consolidate’ as a result of underdeveloped political institutions, rent-seeking in government, a lack of free and fair competition among political parties, and the underdevelopment of civil society to act as a check against government abuse”²³. Concerning the economy, Cambodia is ranked among the ‘Least Developed Countries’. Although the country has sustained remarkable economic growth over the past two decades, development is uneven. About 80% of the population continue to live poorly in rural villages and the levels of education and of qualification are low. In these conditions the middle-class remains embryonic. It cannot challenge overtly the CPP regime, which has steadily consolidated control over the country for more than two decades by cultivating symbiotic relations with big tycoons and by building an encompassing system of clientship from the top of the state to the local through the channel of commune or village councils and CPP-led organizations.

In recent years, officials who occupy government positions and their cronies have been able to block economic reform processes at either the policy-making or implementation stages, leading to the perseverance of oligarchic systems of capitalism in which political authority remains concentrated in the hands of the elite²⁴. Cambodia can thus be characterised as being in a stage of “primitive accumulation”, whose key features are violence, the crude imposition of state authority and early stages of state-building²⁵. Moreover, the ability of many Cambodian people to empathise with each other has been severely compromised by years of civil war and the paranoia of the Khmer Rouges who pitted neighbour against neighbour and kin against kin. A profound collective trauma ensued. It still undermines the prospects of creating effective organisations and networks. Therefore, there are obvious difficulties for Cambodian civil society actors in building an empowered constituency.

3. Conclusion

Finally, the comparison of the contemporary Thai and Cambodian civic spaces reveals that clientship needs to be understood in dynamic terms as a structure of social ties in process. Its pattern varies with the different level of authoritarianism as opposed to democratization in the societies considered. In Thailand, the degree of clients’ faithfulness in that structure still depends on the dialogism of individual advantages. However, it increasingly correlates in with political consciousness, critical reflection, the challenge of conservative values, the demand for social justice from the poor, and the advocacy by segments of the middle class for honesty, competence and dedication in politics. During the last two decades these new claims and more demanding allegiances served as a fertile ground for the creation of pluralist networks of support and collective advocacy. They opened the door to what Robert Fine calls “the post-conventional critical attitude towards [national] identity construction”.

Cambodia, for its part, remains at a stage of “conventional orientation”. It is a country where the CPP propaganda delights in trotting out a conservative view of clientship that emphasize deference and unquestioning obedience of the peasantry to elicit popular consent. This political use of patron-clientelism awards residual power to the poor and to the embryonic middle class. It interferes with a constructive process to achieve popular claims which could efficiently challenge the authoritarian state.

Notes

¹ Kevin Hewison and Garry Rodan, ‘Southeast Asia : the Left and the Rise of Bourgeois Opposition’, in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Politics 2012*, ed. R. Robison (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 25-39.

² David Studdert, *Conceptualizing Community: Beyond the State and Individual* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p.56.

³ David Schack and Wayne Hudson, ‘Civil Society in Asia’, in *Civil Society in Asia*, eds. D. Schack & W. Hudson (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2003), p.2.

⁴For more details see Michael Frolic, ‘State-led civil society’, in *Civil Society in China*, eds. T. Brook and M. Frolic (New York: East Gate, 1997), p. 48.

⁵ Heng-Chee Chang, ‘Democracy: Evolution and Implementation. An Asian Perspective » in *Democracy and Capitalism: Asian and American Perspectives*, eds. R. Bartley et al. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), pp. 1-26.

⁶ Clarck Neher and Marlay Ross, *Democracy and Development in Southeast Asia. The Winds of Change* (Boulder: Westview press, 1995).

⁷ For more details see Somchai Phatharathananunth, *Civil Society and Democratization. Social Movements in Northeast Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006), p. 7.

⁸ See David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Point, 2008) [4th edition].

⁹ Hock-Guan Lee, ‘Introduction in Southeast Asia’, in *Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, ed. Hock-Guan Lee (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004), p. 8.

¹⁰ Chris Hann, 'Introduction, political society and civil anthropology', in *Civil Society, Challenging Western Models*, eds. C. Hann and E. Dunn (London : Routledge, 1996), p. 19.

¹¹ Caroline Hughes and Joachim Öjendal, 'Reassessing Tradition in Times of Political Change : Post-War Cambodia Reconsidered', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37-3 (2006), pp. 419.

¹² For more details see Bernard Formoso, 'Alliance et séniorité, le cas des Lao du nord-est de la Thaïlande', *L'Homme* 115 (1990), pp. 71-97 ; or Joachim Öjendal and Kim Sedara, 'korob, Kaud, Klach : In Search of Agency in Rural Cambodia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37-3 (2006), pp. 507-526.

¹³ For more details see Akin Rabbihadana, 'Clientship and Class Structure in the early Bangkok Period, 1782-1873' in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society*, eds. W.G. Skinner and Th. Kirsch (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 93-124.

¹⁴ For example by Terence Chong, 'Civil Society Organizations: Definitions and Concepts', in *An Asean Community for All: Exploring the Scope of Civil Society Engagement*, eds T. Chong and S. Elies (Singapore : Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2011), p. 21.

¹⁵ Robert Fine, 'Civil Society, Theory, Enlightenment and Critique', in *Civil Society, Democratic Perspectives*, eds R. Fine and S. Ral (London : Franck Cass, 1997), p. 12.

¹⁶ Kevin Hewison, 'Political Space in Southeast Asia : 'Asian-Style' and other Democracies', *Democratization* 6-1 (1999), pp. 239-40.

¹⁷ Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Boom* (St Leonards : Allen and Unwin, 1996), p. 173.

¹⁸ Kevin Hewison, 'Political Space in Southeast Sia: 'Asian-Style' and other Democracies', p. 239.

¹⁹ For more details see Anek Laothamatas, 'Sleeping Giants Awakens? The Middle Class in Thai Politics', *Asian Review* 7 (1993), pp. 78-125.

²⁰ For more details see Chris Baker, 'Thailand's Assembly of the Poor: Background, Drama, Reaction', *Southeast Asia Research* 8 (2000), pp. 5-23; or Bruce Missigham, *The Assembly of the Poor in Thailand. From Local Struggles to National Protest Movement* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003).

²¹ Sophal Ear, *Aid Dependence in Cambodia. How Foreign Assistance Undermines Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 18.

²² For more details see Caroline Hughes, *Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor* (Ithaca/New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2009).

²³ Sophal Ear, *Aid Dependence in Cambodia*, pp. 26-7.

²⁴ Andrew J. Rosser, 'Donors, Neo-Liberalism and Country Ownership in Southeast Asia', in R. Robison (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Politics*, ed. R. Robison (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 182.

²⁵ For more details see Richard Robison, 'Introduction', in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Politics*, ed. R. Robison (London: Routledge, 2012).