

Comparative Analysis of Democratic Systems in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand

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Abstract

This paper analyses Cambodian, Laotian, and Thai democratic systems, emphasising specific political aspects and models of governance. Cambodia's budding democracy, shaped by its experience of dictatorial governance, is remarkably different from Lao's single-party communist regime. At a more complex level of democracy, Thailand, conversely, is a militarised civil administration huddled with stability in civil-military relations. Detailed analyses of political institutions, electoral systems, and civil liberties, among others, will reveal their strengths and weaknesses. The comprehensive literature review provides an understanding of how these regimes yield different outcomes regarding democracy, revealing some common challenges that bar their efforts to democratise and gain political stability. They indicate the huddles in achieving civil rights and freedoms for their populations. The study applies theories of democracy and authoritarian durability by examining political structures, voting procedures, and citizen freedoms. Other aspects explored in this paper include the effect of these political settings on regional peace and stability, including a more extensive view of Southeast Asian development. In addition, the factors that contribute to democratic governance, such as media freedom, are explored. The comparative analysis further focuses on the implications of efforts towards democracy in the region.

Keywords: *Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Democracy, Political Institutions, Electoral Processes, Civil Liberties, Authoritarian Rule, Single-Party System, Military Rule, Southeast Asia, Governance, Stability.*

Introduction

Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand have three different governance models within Southeast Asia's political landscapes. Historical, cultural, and socio-political factors shape the respective histories of these countries. Cambodia has gone through changes that have caused it to have an interesting political situation (Ngoun, 2022). The country has had to contend with dictatorship tendencies in its efforts to become a democracy after the Khmer Rouge regime was toppled down. They experienced challenging times but established a nominally democratic government afterward. However, the success of the government in democratisation remains questionable.

The Cambodian People's Party has long been in the spotlight, employing methods that undermine true democratic practices. Ngoun (2022) argues that Cambodia's leader uses adaptive authoritarian resilience as a source of legitimacy through strategies such as co-opting opposition figures and media control to remain in power. The international community has often ranted against this nation for lack of political competition and violation of individual rights.

Conversely, Laos has an entirely different political idea. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) maintains its dominance in governance through its single-party communist state. Creak and Barney (2018) discuss developing democratic structures within authoritarian regimes by consolidating state and party functions. This has created an organisation resistant to democratic reforms. Moreover, the party maintains stability through control over economic resources and the management of FDI. Nantharath and Kang (2019) explain that controlling economic resources enables the regime to control development and ensure stability. The regime allows suppression of an uprising against the government and simultaneously sacrifices freedoms and human rights associated with democracy (Netipatalachoochote et al., 2017).

The political system of Thailand is characterised by instability and the cycle of rule by military and civilians. Coups of different forms have happened in the country, along with periods characterised by martial law,

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leading to conflict among military, monarchy, and civilian political factions. According to Bultmann (2023), conflict and elite formation shape Thailand's political landscape. Regardless of periodic elections that resemble a democracy, military influence is always present in the nation's politics. The government intervenes occasionally to restore order or protect its interests. As a result, the development of a stable democratic state has been hampered by transitions from one form of governance to another. As Chambers and Ufen (2020) mentioned, increasing military and civilian factionalism in Thailand worsens political instability. This research aims to evaluate the extent of democracy in those three countries and their democratic development challenges.

It is essential to investigate Cambodian, Laotian, and Thai political frameworks, electoral systems, and citizens' rights to fully comprehend varying levels of democratisation and its effects on tranquility in this area (Inguanzo, 2018). A wide range of studies that help to understand political dynamics form the basis for this analysis. In particular, Hao and Gao (2016) examine key drivers behind or against potential democratisation movements across East Asia. Gainsborough (2012), on the other hand, looks into conflicts between elite power and reform across these three nations, depending on the different elites' standpoints regarding democratisation advancements.

Literature Review

Democratic Systems in Cambodia

Cambodia is still in its infancy stage of democratisation, as seen in the one-party system. Even though there are formal multiparty elections, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) does whatever is necessary, including manipulation of elections, suppression of opposition, and utilising state resources strategically to stay in power. The domination extends beyond just a political context but touches every aspect of democratic development in the country. Peou (2019) notes that this kind of hegemony is maintained through party politics using ballots and silencing dissenting voices from critics. These leaders have used these leaders to bring various members of the judiciary system in check when assessing any possible political threat. As a result, autocrats have gained much more legitimacy under this nominal multiparty democracy. During these polls, ruling elites legitimise their control by dismissing alternative perspectives as unimportant. Ou (2020) affirms this point by suggesting that the ruling class utilises the elections to justify their continued control and power.

Control over state institutions is another factor undermining democracy in Cambodia. The CPP uses various methods to conserve its hold of power, including electoral manipulation and suppression of opposition. The party's hold on power relies on the elections and its influence over security agencies. This concentration of power restricts political space, making it impossible for genuine democratic competition to emerge. According to Peou (2019), the judiciary and security organs remain key instruments for maintaining control by the CPP since they do not support institutions that advocate for democratisation or other reforms.

The complexity of Cambodia's political landscape has greatly impacted international organisations' funding of higher education (Hyde et al., 2023). Channy and Ogunniran (2019) argue that these institutions work in a hostile environment, making it difficult to promote education in favour of democratisation. They could promote democracy progressively by creating a more enlightened and participatory society. However, sometimes, their contributions are hindered by time-honoured authoritarian governments and the Cambodian People's Party commanding all political and economic arenas.

The country has experienced challenges in the process of democratisation. The CPP's dubious manipulation of funds complicates the democratic advancement of Cambodia. Monopolistic governance is employed to maintain political power, meaning that state funds are used to reward loyalty, punish opposition groups, secure personal space within the framework, and suppress any insurrections. In addition, the violation of civil liberties and the absence of a free press add to problems in democratic development in Cambodia. Control by CPP over media outlets and suppression of independent journalism prevent public access to unbiased news (Channy & Ogunniran, 2019). This affects the ability of citizens to make informed decisions

and participate in real political discussions. Consequently, this makes the democratic process highly tilted towards the ruling party, leaving no space for political rivalry or dissenting opinions.

Democratic Systems in Laos

A single-party communist state, Laos operates with extreme centralisation in its governance structure. Creak and Barney (2022) discuss the resilience of the Laotian regime attributed to the political economy of statist market socialism. The regime consolidates its grip on power by maintaining control over economic resources and distributing them strategically (Huang & Ho, 2017). In Bui's (2019) analysis of constitutional amendments in Laos, there have been no democratic reforms or end to LPRP hegemony. Foreign direct investment (FDI) and economic absorptive capabilities play a considerable role in the Laotian political economy. Nantharath and Kang (2019) posit that FDI supports sustainable growth, but only when used accountably, which is lacking and needs to be improved in Laos.

Centralised control and political stability have remained dominant in Laos. LPRP dominates the political landscape in Laos. The party's control of the state and economy engenders a highly centralised governance structure. Creak and Barney (2022) add that this has led to socio-political considerations defined by statist market socialism. The regime has, therefore, been able to maintain economic resources and distribute them strategically to have power over the period. Bui (2019) underlines that constitutional amendments in Laos have changed little regarding democratic reforms, enabling the LPRP's power to be more entrenched. This absence of democratic mechanisms and waves of LPRP's continuous dominance hinders political liberalisation in the country.

The governance model in Laos is based on the political economy of statist market socialism. This model permits the state to dominate the market, ensuring that all economic undertakings align with political plans. Creak and Arney (2022) assert that the system helps the regime keep its hold on power by connecting economic advantages to political devotion. Resource strategic management is essential for the regime's longevity because it allows for rewarding allies and suppressing prospective rebels.

Laos relies heavily upon foreign direct investment for economic growth, making it fundamental to its economy's control. According to Nantharath and Kang (2019), the absorption of foreign investments into the country has been well coordinated with development needs while keeping in mind the political stability of the polity. As such, they maintain a delicate balance between ensuring that the benefits accrued from the economy do not lead to destabilisation of the politics, hence preserving their power's status quo.

Like Cambodia, there are evident challenges to democratic reform. The economic growth due to FDI has not improved conditions for democratic reforms in Laos. The LPRP's tight control over political and economic resources stifles any meaningful push toward democratisation. Although Bui (2019) argues that constitutional amendments and other political reforms are unlikely to disrupt current power dynamics, they ensure the LPRP remains in power instead of promoting real political competition.

Democratic Systems in Thailand

The democratic instability of Thailand is primarily attributed to the military's influence in Thai politics. According to Pongsudhirak (2018), the dynamics of Thai-Cambodian relations show that the domestic political instability in Thailand impacts its foreign policy and regional interaction. In Thailand, the nexus between domestic politics and international relations, as it relates to democratic development, is thus complicated, linking implications. Nonetheless, significant military interventions continue to disrupt this country's democracy despite the existence of chronic elections.

Politically, factionalism dynamics are critical in any country (Chambers & Ufen, 2020). The authors claimed that political instability in Thailand increased due to both civilian and military factions; hence, they are highly interconnected, thus making them stronger. Coup d'états and power struggles result from such factionalism, thus jeopardising democracy. Furthermore, many coups have been staged because of ongoing military-political alliances. The last coup was in 2014 back home. This shows that there is still an ongoing

war between generals in uniform and democratically elected leaders. Chambers and Ufen (2020) provide evidence to support the claim that Thailand is a very good example of factions in Southeast Asia that are easily seen as military and civilian factionalism. Factions within the armed forces often cause internal conflicts and power tussles as they compete for their interests. Hence, such internal conflicts within military organisations make Thai politics very complex.

Although frequent elections have taken place in Thailand, they do not translate into democracy due to the ongoing military control. Pongsudhirak (2018) argues that Thailand's domestic political instability affects its foreign policy and relations with neighbouring countries, which makes democratic development complicated. Although the election is part of a democratic process, governments formed due to these elections are mostly unstable because of the military's stronghold. Therefore, democracy does not function effectively due to this cycle; there will always be coup de tats where civilians try to govern before generals return to power again.

Military influence and factionalism destabilise governance and policy-making in Thailand. This military intervention threat and constant power struggles among factions make it hard for most governments to implement policies. The instability disrupts long-term planning and development because policies may be abandoned or reversed after a coup or military intervention. Pongsudhirak (2018) argued that such domestic instability also affects Thailand's foreign policy, as inconsistent governance would result in unpredictable international relations.

Comparative Analysis in Literature

Howe (2021) explores state capacity and regime strategies concerning governance in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand to know how the governments maintain control over their populations. The author stresses the role of co-optation and coercive measures about culturally organised religions to consolidate authority and silence dissenting voices. In Cambodia's political system, governing institutions have some control over faith-based organisations to reduce dissent. Also, Laos and Thailand use state institutions intertwined with religiosity for political direction, stabilising their governments.

Another factor worth considering when comparing democracy among Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand is conflict and elite formation. The widespread elite formation and conflict situation in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia has been the subject of a study by Bultmann (2023). This research suggests that elite groups are integrated into larger political structures to achieve outcomes consistent with those desired by the ruling class. Military coups or political chaos that undermines the democratic process often led to severe rivalries among elites in Thailand. However, in Laos and Cambodia, less explicit disruptions often threaten elite solidarity and prevent reforms from taking place. Bultmann (2023) illustrates how elites can contribute to stability or instability of governance, thereby making democracy hard to establish. hey argue they are responsible for democracy's establishment or destruction in such countries.

Gainsborough (2012) offers an analytical framework for understanding the main components of democratic development and evaluates the conflicting interests between elites and reformers in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. The study shows that progress is hardly possible as there is little backing from elite forces. However, for example, political architecture is monopolised by LPRP, which obstructs democracy. Also, the ruling CPP ensures its continued existence in Cambodia by influencing elections and suppressing opponents' movements (Hellmann, 2017). In this way, Gainsborough (2012) enables us to comprehend how elite opposition to any change hampers democracy.

The pathways to democracy offer a straightforward insight into countries' current situation in the democratisation process. Hao and Gao (2016) analyse how democracy has emerged in East Asia through a comparative and qualitative study of the third wave of democratisation. Halloran et al. (2018) also examine various factors, such as economic growth, international influences, and the strength of civil societies, which affect or support the process of democratisation. For example, these factors impact Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand differently. For instance, Thailand's economy flourishes due to an engaged citizenry. Conversely,

Cambodia's low-income and weak civil societies restrict its democratisation process. Hence, Hao and Gao (2016) offer significant recommendations on what these countries must do to move towards democracies.

Regarding democracy and development, Aminuddin and Purnomo (2019) critically analysed Southeast Asia's political regime and economic expansion. They reported that economic growth strategies and policies support or undermine democratic governance. For instance, authoritarianism might seem favourable for growth in Cambodia's economy under CPP (Blake, 2019). Laos has a stable economy but lacks a democratic political system – its market socialism is state-run (Gokan et al., 2020; Phommachith & Thanitbenjasith, 2020). Thailand experienced many military coups that have affected its governance. Hence, this research on democracy considered both political and economic aspects.

Democratic recession is another key theme that emerges in research on the three countries. Fong (2023) acknowledges that Asia is experiencing a democratic decline. Thus, research is essential to understand what may be causing this decline in democracy. Fong's (2023) study is especially useful when comprehending current problems facing countries such as Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. The researcher emphasises three major points, including the rise of authoritarianism, neglecting civil liberties, and eroding democratic institutions (Einzenberger & Schaffar, 2018). In Cambodia, the ruling party, CPP, maybe a pointer to these trends due to its increasing influence over every government sector. Also, Laos still shows no sign of being a democratic state as a single-party system prevails. In contrast, political turbulence coupled with military coups in Thailand shows how much democracy has been lacking in this region.

Through comparative analysis of Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, it is possible to see how dissimilar the democratic practices and the problems of each country in democratisation are. They also have different challenges regarding democratic development due to their authoritarian tendencies in Cambodia, persistent one-party rule in Laos, and military-civilian transition between civilian democracies in Thailand. These political systems should be noted so Southeast Asia can create good institutions that meet political desires. In this respect, the role of political economy is critical in understanding democratic systems.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts an analytical approach of comparing the democratic regimes of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. The study applies theories of democracy and authoritarian durability by examining political structures, voting procedures, and citizen freedoms. Agreeing with Howe (2021), who merges state potentiality with regime tactics, Hao and Gao (2016) describe routes toward democratisation. Therefore, this research also investigates the elites' role in facilitating or obstructing political stability, as Bultmann (2023) and Gainsborough (2012) signalled.

Theories of Democratisation

Democratisation theories provide a good groundwork for moving away from the rule based on authoritarianism; this helps to better understand the democratic transitions. According to Cao and Gao (2016), Southeast Asian political transformation fits perfectly in the Third Wave of Democratisation. The period, however, which began in the 1970s, noticed several countries making their way further towards democracy (Cuyvers, 2019; Sharma et al., 2020). The wave has been marked by development goals, civil society support, and foreign state involvement as significant factors leading to this trend. Cao and Gao (2016) indicate that economic growth is fundamental for those seeking to restore democracy because it allows its members access to education, enabling them to participate in politics. From this perspective, analysing Thailand's relatively advanced economy amid periods marked by military coups against democracy becomes significant. Conversely, Cambodia and Laos show identical economic stagnation patterns characterising them due to their poor levels of development.

Many other factors are important for the promotion of democracy in a country. A strong civil society could check on government power, increase political participation, and lobby for constitutional reforms. In Thailand, civil society's tenacity is evident from longer-sustained public demonstrations and political

movements aimed at achieving democratic leadership (Chaney, 2017). On the contrary, civil societies in Cambodia and Laos are curtailed and cannot impact on the democratic changes.

Authoritarian Resilience

Authoritarian and dictatorial resilience theories are also related to understanding the stability of democracy in the world. According to Howe (2021), authoritarian governments in places like Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand manipulate or intimidate organised religions to lose control. To strengthen power and silence voices of opposition, these administrations merge co-optation with coercion and strategically allocate resources. In Cambodia, for example, CPP has established itself through electoral fraud, control over the judicial system and security forces, and silencing opposing voices. The endurance of the CPP is a testament that it can adjust to external and internal pressures while still holding an authoritarian grip on power (Peou, 2019). Likewise, in Laos, LPRP utilises its dominance over economic resources. They distribute them in such ways that they benefit those in power and ensure political stability (Creak & Barney, 2022). Such a scenario of market socialism helps this regime to utilise any potential dissenters, thus promoting its one-party reign.

Role of Elites

The political outcomes, including stability for authoritarian and transitional regimes, are largely attributed to elite actors. Bultmann (2023) examines the influence of elite dynamics on political stability and change in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. For example, elite conflicts in Thailand are often manifested through military coups and other forms of political turmoil that interrupt democracy. These factors contributing to political instability include the oscillation between civilian and military rule. According to Gainsborough (2012), there have been several instances of elite resistance against reforms in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. This is bad for democracy since the elites are always afraid of potential threats to their power. In Laos, for example, the ruling elites of the LPRP do not want any democratic changes, which will lead to more democracy in this country and keep the party in power. The CPP uses the elections to gain a semblance of legitimacy in Cambodia while ignoring opposition parties and establishing more dictatorial policies.

Pathways toward Democracy

Pathways to democracy are not straightforward, as Howe (2021) observes. The study notes how state capacity, regime strategies, elite dynamics, and external influences work together to determine these routes. This study adopts an integrative approach to unravelling Cambodia's, Laos's, and Thailand's democratic systems. Co-optation and coercion are two regime strategies that keep dictators in control, according to Howe (2021). These states' regime strategies must be understood to know the obstacles to their democratisation. According to Bultmann (2023) and Gainsborough (2012), elites are an important factor in the pathways towards democracy. Progress to democracy can be made easier or harder depending on the political dynamics and whether they support or oppose changes. Still, in Thailand, the political scene is unstable because of the contest between power-hungry military men and civilian elites that consistently impede democratic governance (Lynch, 2004). However, entrenched elites can stall reforms in Cambodia and Laos, thus perpetuating authoritarian regimes.

International pressure and economic development are also other important factors that influence paths towards democracy. Hao and Gao (2016) highlight that these two elements are crucial for initiating democratic transformative processes. International organisations and foreign aid can assist civil society groups in building institutions for government accountability, which will eventually usher in democracy. Moreover, conditions necessary for democracy can be achieved mainly through economic development by producing an educated citizenry whose desires lean towards politics.

Integration of Theories

Much literature on political development has associated democratisation with hesitations towards authoritarianism and the behaviourism of those in power. Howe (2021) presents a comprehensive model to explore democracy in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand from the points of view of democratisation theories, resistance against totalitarianism, and the behaviour of power brokers. Theories of state capabilities and regime strategies by Howe (2021), pathways taken by democracies as outlined by Hao and Gao (2016) as well as Bultmann (2023) or Gainsborough's (2012) reflection on the elite will be used as a sound basis when considering democracy building process in Southeast Asia.

Hao and Gao (2016) and Bultmann (2023) look at democracy in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand using a theoretical framework. The study draws on types of elections, political institutions and civil liberties, and theories of democratisation, authoritarianism resilience, and elite dynamics to comprehensively understand these countries' obstacles in creating democratic governance. They show how complex all these processes are and that there is no single pattern of democracy. Hence, people can understand which countries perform well or poorly among the democracies in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. This kind of understanding helps foster democratisation and stability in the region.

Analysis and Discussion

Cambodia: Dominant Party System and Authoritarian Resilience

Cambodia's new democracy landscape is hampered by a political party system that does not support political competition. The country may formally conduct multiparty elections, but the CPP dominates its political scene. The party uses various strategies to establish its dominance. This shows how adaptive authoritarianism survives in the region. The dominance of the ruling CPP in the political and economic life of the country has maintained its power. Ngoun (2022) details how the CPP employs a clutch of means to appropriate opposition leaders, control media content, and rig election outcomes. This could involve using legal or illegal means to compel some of them (opposition leaders) into exile or making them insignificant within their states. This includes employing judicial processes and law enforcement instruments to subdue dissent as it tries to present itself as a champion of democratic principles.

Over the past two decades, there have been immense transformations in the media landscape of Cambodia, representing the strategies of control and appropriation employed by the ruling party (Ngoun, 2022). Many independent media outlets are frequently intimidated, shut down, or censored altogether. In this situation, the CPP has a monopoly over information dissemination, which empowers it to influence public perception while stifling opposing voices. Consequently, the state-owned press dominates, making it difficult to conduct credible elections and eventually negating democracy. Even so, only occasional opposition parties will avail themselves of participating in elections. Such moves always provide a semblance of an active political environment yet safeguard the ongoing dominance of the CPP. Others suggest that increased pressure is needed from abroad on the Cambodian government to expedite democratic reforms.

Laos: Single-Party Rule and Strategic Resource Management

LPRP's state and economy resemble communist regimes that do not allow for any form of democracy. Its governing system is impervious to democratic reforms, thus revealing the authoritarian resilience that forms part of its core. To maintain political stability and suppress dissent, the regime effectively controls foreign investments and economic resources, as acknowledged by Creak and Barney (2022). The Lao economy is heavily dependent on FDI. Thus, the current government remains in power only through proper management of these funds and their control. Thus, LPRP distributes resources selectively rewarding those loyal only to strengthen their hold over power at the expense of others.

Besides, Laos is a communist country where the ruling party runs everything, including state-controlled institutions and the economy. Because of its centralised government structure, it is not easily prone to democratic movements that would have facilitated people's participation in decision-making processes concerning matters directly or indirectly affecting their lives. Creak and Barney (2022) show how these regimes manipulate such resources to retain political stability while simultaneously silencing all opposition.

In this regard, FDI is crucial in ensuring markets' fluidity, thereby empowering those who manage the government regarding such investments. This means that LPRP should be perceived as a provider when it gives some individuals lower-priced goods at the expense of others who cannot endure this disparity, creating divisions among people.

According to Bui (2019), the constitutional amendments in Laos have further entrenched the power of the LPRP. Generally speaking, they strengthen the party's legal framework for governance rather than put in place democratic reforms. No independent courts or free press would allow dissent against this regime. Therefore, it can closely manage any opposition. Besides, Lao civil society is also heavily restrained. NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and other civil society organisations are subject to close surveillance by the government, reducing their chances of pushing for democracy or challenging state policies. Such repression of civil society makes it impossible for people's movements advocating grassroots democracy to gain traction.

Thailand: Instability and Military Influence

The democracy of Thailand is characterised by military intervention leading to fragmentation in its political arena. This implies no stability within Thai democracy. The unstable political atmosphere hinders democratic governance. Also, the presence of the army in Thai politics erodes democratic institutions, thus causing continuous political unrest. The military coup history in Thailand shows the sectarian divisions that are deeply rooted in both military and civilian politics. Chamber and Ufen (2020) assert that power struggles, which lead to coup d'état and any other political disturbance, sometimes ruin factionalism. These, therefore, interrupt democracy, put civilian authority on hold, and make history repeat itself, bringing about instability, which hinders long-term progress toward democracy.

Although there are sporadic elections, the army still controls Thai politics, making democracy ineffective. Just like a protector from outside threats, the army ensures that everything remains stable and orderly whenever there is any political need. However, such leadership does not last long, as successful military coups like in 2014 proved. These create changes that take some time before another major political event. The environment is not supportive of democratisation.

A major change would be going on regarding how the coups affect Thai democracy against the backdrop of power relations. According to Pongsudhirak (2018), the interplay between external and internal factors that influence governance occurs through mutually constitutive processes. This means that their linkages are never simple or one-way but always result in actors facing one direction coming up against other actors facing another direction. Domestic instability affects Thailand's foreign policy and regional interactions through the higher levels of the military's involvement in governance.

While some nations have been careful in engaging Thailand politically when trouble is at home, others have demanded stricter adherence to democratic reforms. Consequently, factionalism extends beyond its military wing because even civilian political parties and movements exist within this system. In this respect, such divisions often engage with extra-electoral acts or elections to get hold of power, leading them into a very tense and divided political arena. Such disunity hampers attempt to establish a unified and stable democratic order as political figures are generally more concerned about swift wealth accumulation and individual dominance than extensive democracy enhancement.

Comparative Insights and Regional Implications

In their quest for stable democracy, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand have taken different paths; nevertheless, they are influenced by various historical, cultural, and socio-political elements, making them unique. Regarding the current state of democracy in Cambodia, there is a predominance of one Political Party, which hampers its transition into a fully-fledged, stable political environment. Many Cambodians still do not realise what democracy means. Therefore, it remains an issue of who leads rather than how one should lead. To maintain some form of political competition, the CPP uses three main tools: cooperation, control

of the media, and manipulation during elections. However, this depends on not being in an autocratic set-up.

On the contrary, Laos has been characterised by a single-party rule alongside strategic resource management that can easily be deduced from its continuous enforcement of centralised authoritarianism. It can be implied that dictatorship cannot be surpassed in efforts at democratisation, even if it is very appealing. Present-day Thailand can only be described as anarchy because of military coups and clandestine regime changes, making it hard for the political system to decide on anything; hence, the democratisation process is threatened, or they revert to dictatorship with its endless toolbox campaigns and random happenings. It is crucial to understand these trends by looking at democracy from a Southeast Asian perspective since we know what those regimes stand for within their territories. Cambodia and Laos are authoritarian regimes that disturb peace and obstruct democracy growth in Thailand.

Analysing how political, economic, and social factors interact is significant in facilitating democratic reforms in these nations. Local civil society organisations, independent media, and multiparty elections with foreign support might help democratisation. However, it should be noted that inappropriate circumstances can worsen the situations during these occurrences. When speaking about democracy, these three countries employ different forms of government, resulting from obstacles regarding stable governance. Moreover, this research examines their distinct political situations, which offer examples of what political decisions must not be like or how one ought to refrain from making such choices if they do not want to have an impact on their ways of fostering democracy in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Despite the stark contrasts, there exist similarities between the democratic practices and principal obstacles to democratic governance in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. This perspective also distinguishes true democracies in those countries. The first-party system limits the development of democracy in Cambodia, thus hampering political competition. It shows how adaptable CPP has established a lasting system to cope with changing times. For example, this happens through penetrating opposition parties, controlling mass media channels, and manipulating elections. So, Cambodia has no absolute democratic values regarding political and economic resources. The courts of police have also been taken over by the CPP and serve as instruments for suppressing dissent and looking like democracy. On an international scale, various views have emerged about this kind of democracy. People want measures, such as constitutional amendments, favouring genuine democratic rule, whereas others prefer lenient approaches. As per the unique LPRP pattern of its unchanging political hegemony in Laos with a heavily centralised administration opposed to any form of democracy, LPRP ruled the state and economy.

Such regimes exist for several reasons, including strategically managing vital economic resources and foreign investments. Thus, political stability through these means can be maintained by rewarding loyalty to ruling parties and suppressing alternative voices with this influence over key sectors. Also, no free media or independent judicial system is under the ruling party's reign. Thus, constitutional amendments have only strengthened the legal foundations for exercising party power but do not show any signs of democratic reforms. Dictatorships are, therefore, in a position to consolidate their authority further.

Thailand finds itself in a critical situation because of the constant interference of military forces within politics. As such, military intervention in democracy undermines it, resulting in persistent political instability. For instance, the number of military coups in Thailand indicates that there might be some kind of inbuilt factionalism among army and civilian groups, which leads to power conflicts, affecting governance structures adversely. Despite having had numerous elections since 1932, Thai politicians always keep their citizens out, hence curtailing any likelihood of genuine democracy. Additionally, foreign policies and regional diplomatic relations are local aspects that exacerbate inequities among neighbouring areas, making it even harder for Thailand's democratic changeover. Notably, armed forces and civil parties have stand-off positions, thereby rendering it impossible to have any semblance of order regarding establishing self-indulgent democracy.

Key Recommendations

Political Institutions and Electoral Processes

For democracy to prevail, there must be solid political institutions and an election process that is not biased in any way. A contrasting analysis of Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand brings different issues and possibilities.

In Cambodia, the power of the CPP has been reinforced through electoral fraud plus oppression against rivals. Hence, it is vital to improve election credibility through an independent judiciary. Therefore, apart from maintaining transparent observation during elections, they can support technical assistance to these electoral reforms and enlighten people about the law (Hyde et al., 2023). In addition, media independence should be promoted so that there can be fair journalism practices that would keep those in power on their toes.

Laos is one of the few remaining countries that are unitary with only a minimum degree of democratic features. LPRP controls all political and economic resources, which has led to a highly centralised government. To promote democracy and human rights, international actors could press for gradual political reform that will feature multiparty competition and enhanced independence of the judiciary (Hyde et al., 2023). Moreover, there is a need to support civil society organisations advocating for political pluralism and legal system reform.

In Thailand, democracy has been marred by instability and constant interruptions from the military. This happens because military personnel frequently intervene in democratically elected governments' affairs. Some recommendations, therefore, embrace motivating constitutional amendments that seek to restrict the roles of the military in political matters, incorporate independent electoral commissions, and enhance the impartiality of judges (Hyde et al., 2023). In addition, international institutions could create a platform for communication between army heads and the citizens to foster internal peace.

Economic Dimensions

For a country like Cambodia, it is essential to break down authoritarianism so that democratic reforms can come about through open economic reforms and addressing corruption. In addition, Cambodia can get international financing partners by asking for their help in expenditure policies, anti-corruption strategies, and fair distribution of resources, among others. Moreover, an all-inclusive economy could be realised through private investment and the promotion of education (Sharma et al., 2020).

To maintain political stability, Laos's ruling elite controls all possible resources. Hence, economic reform initiatives should be made transparent and accountable to lessen power designs. In addition, foreign investments compatible with global best practices in corporate governance may diversify the economy and thus reduce reliance on state-owned sectors (Sharma et al., 2020). Furthermore, by strengthening local institutions, development partners abroad could promote diversification in these economies through capacity-building initiatives.

Thailand has a lot of things influencing its political situation, such as a lack of financial equality and graft. Some of these economic reform initiatives that encourage transparency, fight against corruption, and ensure an equal income distribution need to be introduced (Sharma et al., 2020). For this to happen, such policies must be implemented with technical assistance from international organisations and promotional anti-corruption strategies or inclusive economic growth in Thailand. Supporting initiatives to reinforce the poor's economic participation might bring political calmness.

Civil Liberties and Civil Society

The CPP's domination over media and crackdown on civil society activities are detrimental to democratisation. Supporting independent media outlets, promoting freedom of expression, and protecting human rights defenders are critical steps. International organisations can provide financial and technical

support to civil society organisations, advocate for legal reforms that protect civil liberties, and monitor human rights violations (Chaney, 2017).

The LPRP's control over civil society stifles democratic development. It is imperative to encourage the establishment of independent civic associations and promote freedom of assembly and association. International actors can fund and build up local NGOs to lobby for legal reform to save individual liberties and create global partnerships among civic organisations (Chaney, 2017).

In Thailand, civil liberties have been significantly restricted and recurring military interventions have weakened civil organisations. Hence, it is crucial to know how to promote freedom of speech & assembly together with freedom of association (Chaney, 2017). Various international organisations can help support organisations that protect civil liberties through legal frameworks and provide funding or technical assistance to civil society organisations, including monitoring human rights violations. This helps create trust between state agencies and citizen groups, ultimately leading to democracy.

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