

# **The Dynamics of Social Change in Cambodia Moving away from Traditionalism?**

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## **Abstract**

Despite enormous exogenous influence since the early 1990s and considerable changes caused by the economic rebound, Cambodian society still appears largely traditional and has taken only limited steps towards modernization. Although the motivation of the current regime – maintaining its hegemony – does not offer incentives for the evolution of modern attitudes, perceptions and behavior, the impact of a change in government would not be sufficient for a general shift. Instead, the level of education, likely to continue to improve, has already had a noticeable positive effect on attitudes toward a more modern way of life. By analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, the author examines the evolvement of religion, family cohesion, gender roles and equality, the hierarchic social order, economics, and politics to find evidence for the dynamics of Cambodian society.

## **Keywords**

Cambodia, Modernization, Transformation, Values, Society

## **1. Introduction**

Since the Second World War, Cambodia has suffered more than most from global change. The proxy war in Indochina and a totalitarian ideology picked up by some Khmer students in Paris resulted in a bloody civil war from the 1960s to 1975 (Kiernan 1985) and afterwards in the infamous terror regime of the Khmer Rouge (Kiernan 1996). After Vietnamese occupation in the 1980s, most parties to the Cambodian conflict agreed to stop fighting and to establish a democratic regime with general elections, separation of powers, and individual liberty rights. Since then, there has been tremendous change: Cambodia's population more than doubled between

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1986 and 2012, and life expectancy rose from 46 to 66 years in the same period. The political system, despite its dominating autocratic elements, is quite stable after the last Khmer Rouge forces surrendered in 1998. The economy recovered, with average annual GDP growth of 7.7 per cent between 1986 and 2012, mainly supported by a thriving garment industry since the 1990s.

One may assume that this general development has also influenced human attitudes and behavior. This assumption is based upon five stimulating factors. First, as a result of the economic rebound, the number of people living under the poverty line decreased from 6.9 million in 2004 to 3.0 million in 2011 (Australian Aid / World Bank Group 2015: xv).<sup>1</sup> Normally, with such an improvement in conditions people develop new desires beyond basic needs (Maslow 1943). Second, beginning with the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC, May 1992 to November 1993), the Kingdom of Cambodia – re-established by the constitution in 1993 – has been a hotspot of international development aid: between 1992 and 2012, more than US\$ 10 billion in official development assistance (ODA) have flowed into the country, accompanied by thousands of international experts and development workers bringing their own values, beliefs, and way of living to Cambodia.

Third, compared to the 1970s and 1980s, the Khmer have increased access to information through education, media consumption and the use of electronic communication devices. In 2014, 96 per cent of young Cambodians (between the ages of 15 to 24) owned a mobile phone, and 92 per cent had access to both TV and radio. By contrast, only 34 per cent accessed the internet (UNDP 2014a: 4), and 79 per cent of those with internet access visited Facebook at least once a month (ibid: 16). Fourth, Cambodia's demographic development is very positive. The median age is less than 25 years and these young people have enjoyed a much more peaceful life and with fewer privations during socialization than their parents did decades ago. Fifth, geographic mobility in "Cambodia's rapid rural-urban migration with a focus on Phnom Penh" (Asian Development Bank 2012: 11) takes people permanently away from their villages, communes, and districts (Ministry of Planning 2012: 9). With their new experiences, these mainly young Cambodians also influence relatives at home. In addition, tourism increased the connectivity to people from other countries.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Comparable data for the 1990s are scarce and are based on "backward projection" (Ear 2012: 34).

<sup>2</sup> A sixth driver of social change could be climate change, in particular regarding practices (behavior) in the agriculture sector. Yet the dimension and concrete consequences of

Whereas change is obviously taking place, it is largely unexplored whether it has also caused a change in society as expressed by changes in people's attitudes, perceptions and behavior and perhaps a change in values. This article seeks to answer this question by analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data. However, when dealing with traditionalism and modernization there are some methodological complexities which have to be tackled at first.

## **2. Methodological Approach**

### **2.1 Traditionalism and modernization**

According to Bert Hoselitz, "traditionalistic action takes place within a context in which explicit reference is made to the past history of development of a society and to previous states of its existence" (Hoselitz 1961: 86). Hence, traditionalism reflects on historic awareness, stable institutions (both formal and informal), as well as widely homogenous patterns in people's attitudes and perceptions. The past becomes a pattern to manage the present, largely constant and unchanged over generations, and is able to shape the character of a society and even a whole ethnicity.

Due to stable living conditions, traditionalism in its "conceptual generality" (Apter 1967: 67ff.) was effective over centuries. However, the persistence of this "mindset" (Degele / Dries 2005: 19) was challenged by different – although partly simultaneous – impacts: the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution. These factors introduced new elements such as autonomy, flexibility, and rationality. Therefore,

[...] "modernization" [...] refers to the dynamic form that the age-old process of innovation has assumed as a result of the explosive proliferation of knowledge in recent centuries. [...] "Modernization" may be defined as the process by which historically evolved institutions are adapted to the rapidly changing functions that reflect the unprecedented increase in man's knowledge [...]. This process of adaption had its origins and initial influences in the societies of Western Europe, but [these changes] have been extended to all other societies and have resulted in a worldwide transformation affecting all human relationships (Black 1966: 7).

Similarly, Daniel Lerner argued that modernization is "the social process of which development is the economic component" (Lerner 1967: 21), a definition Henry Bernstein refined: "(1) modernization is a total social process

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climate change in Cambodia is unexplored and hence, it is too early to establish a direct or indirect impact on changes within society.

associated with (or subsuming) economic development in terms of the preconditions, concomitants, and consequences of the latter; (2) that this process constitutes a ‘universal pattern’” (Bernstein 1971: 141).<sup>3</sup>

In the 1970s, modernization theory drew increasing criticism. In particular, Dean Tipps identified numerous inconsistencies and shortcomings at ideological, empirical and metatheoretic levels that led him to conclude that modernization was an “illusion” (Tipps 1973: 223). In his late and global reply, Ronald Inglehart was able to revitalize the concept by substantiating that “there are powerful linkages between belief systems and political and socioeconomic variables” as well as “coherent and to some extent predictable patterns of change in values and belief systems” (Inglehart 1997: 328). By focusing his research on people’s attitudes and perceptions, he circumvented the concept’s biggest shortcoming as a universal, catch-all approach lacking common criteria and a clear definition of the nexus of its numerous components<sup>4</sup> that describe a century-long, ongoing process that seems to run non-linearly and aimlessly.

## 2.2 Operationalization for empirical research

Although it may seem self-evident to view tradition and modernity as diametric extremes on a one-dimensional continuum, this approach cannot contribute to a better understanding of numerous processes bundled under the umbrella “modernization”. To avoid conceptual arbitrariness and methodological blur, I adhere to three assumptions in this article: (1) modernization can take place anywhere, irrespective of a nation’s culture and its stage of development; (2) modernization can be measured in its sub-dimensions only with clear statements about their initial positions and development direction; and (3) to detect modernization, it is sufficient to provide evidence that there is a process toward modernity, irrespective of any absolute benchmarks or normative prejudices<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The relationship of these components can be regarded differently. Whereas the Marxist school claims that “economic development determines the political and cultural characteristics of a society”, the Weberian version “claims that culture shapes economy and political life” (Inglehart 1997: 67).

<sup>4</sup> Inglehart mentions a “syndrome of changes” including “industrialization, [...] urbanization, mass education, occupational specialization, bureaucratization, and communications development” (Inglehart 1997: 8).

<sup>5</sup> Change, development, and modernization when used in academic debates hardly get by without normative assumptions. Especially with regard of the evolvement of agrarian societies into complex industrialized nation-states in the western hemisphere, the terms imply positive and desirable processes that lead to improved living conditions for a vast

In this article I use Black's definition and focus on six indicators that are relevant for proving evidence of modernization trends in human relationships only. To generate indicators, I partly adopt Inglehart's (1997: 42–43) approach and assumptions.

1. Religion: In traditional societies, spirituality and transcendent beliefs play an important role. In western countries, modernity promoted secular attitudes. Hypotheses: To detect a modernization trend, (1) the close relationship between state actors and the clergy breaks down, and (2) secular institutions, attitudes and behavior become more significant than religious values.
2. Family cohesion: Orientation and commitment to the own family, kin and/or the clan are widespread in traditional settings. Hypothesis: In a society with strong modernization processes, family cohesion decreases in favor of other interpersonal ties beyond kinship relations.
3. Gender roles and equality: Most traditional societies need two-parent families to ensure their survival. In particular women have limited access to careers outside their home. Hypothesis: Modernization processes favor emancipation of women that lead to new role conceptions and an increased self-awareness of females.
4. Hierarchical social order: Traditional societies (due to linguistic and ethnic diversity not the equivalent of nations or states) tend to be much more homogeneous than modern societies. To ensure obedience to cultural norms and political order, certain formal and informal institutions are necessary. Hypothesis: Hierarchical patterns in interpersonal relationships erode in modernization processes.
5. Economics: In a traditional economy, informal arrangements such as clientelism and patronage dominate in socio-economic exchanges. Hypotheses: To detect a modernization trend, (1) formal trade-offs gain significance and (2) a notion of social responsibility increases among entrepreneurs.

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majority in the long run due to, for example, higher incomes and life expectancy, increase of production and consumption, access to education and welfare services, pluralism and open societies, and political participation in democratic states. In this article I strictly reject such a normative liability; therefore, I avoid any discussion about whether modernization is also desirable for Cambodia. Instead, I just use this term for structural description and analysis only.

6. Politics: Traditional societies are often illiberal and/or undemocratic and formal state institutions have low significance. Hypothesis: In modernization processes, one can expect increased significance of liberal institutions and a growing acceptance of democratic values among both the people and the elites.

To estimate how sustainable modernization processes in human relationships are, it is necessary to connect modernization with the assumption of change in values, as Inglehart (1977, 2006) did. Values, analytically understood as independent variables, are qualities and characteristics that are taken to be normatively positive. An individual who accepts certain values perceives them as ethical and desirable. Value systems give orientation to social groups up to complete societies and can change over time. In recent years, scholars who predict a “*convergence* of values as a result of modernization” have been challenged by those who emphasize the “*persistence* of traditional values despite economic and political changes” (Inglehart / Welzel 2005: 19). However, research that seeks to substantiate these conflicting concepts usually offers only limited evidence: Measuring changes in values is quite complex because empirical researchers need stable panel surveys over years or – even better – decades. In addition, given that Karl-Heinz Hillmann (2001: 29–32) identified 17 levels with 108 eligible indicators, studies are usually limited to certain aspects of change in values.

In consequence, any study about change in values is naturally incomplete. Moreover, representative surveys are impossible to conduct in countries with political instability or even civil war. Therefore, studies about change in values in Cambodia that examine quantitative data date from 1998<sup>6</sup> at the earliest and have to exclude changes in the decades before.

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<sup>6</sup> In 1997, unidentified assassins killed at least 16 people in a demonstration of the main opposition party. A few months later, Prime Minister Hun Sen initiated a bloody coup d'état against his coalition partner with dozens of victims. In 1998 when parliamentary elections were held, again dozens were killed, mainly during protests after the ballot. With the capitulation of the last Khmer Rouge forces in their strongholds on the Thai border, an era of violence and utmost confrontation finally ended.

### **2.3 Data**

This article does not try to measure a change in values definitively because the data to prove or disprove such assumptions are insufficient. Instead, it wants to shed light only on current trends that can be used as a guideline for further research projects. For this analysis in first instance I use, firstly, data collected by the Asian Barometer Survey<sup>7</sup> – a regional partner of the Global Barometer Surveys – in 2008 (“Wave 2”) and 2012 (“Wave 3”). In 2008, interviewers surveyed 1,000 voting-aged adults in all parts of Cambodia, divided into five geographical zones (Phnom Penh, Plain Region, Tonle Sap Region, Coastal Region and Plateau and Mountain Region) between 19 April and 5 May. In 2012, the sample was conducted between 29 February and 21 March and increased to 1,200 interviewees *ceteris paribus*. Both surveys cover numerous topics, of which “social capital”, “traditionalism”, and “authoritarian vs. democratic values” are most relevant for this study. The data of 2012 have been weighted to ensure an adequate urban-rural proportion.

Following the principle of data triangulation (Denzin 1978: 340), I use data collected in my own survey in January 2007 to provide additional information whenever it seems appropriate and necessary. It was designed as a stratified quota-sampling, with a sample of 1,200 individuals aged 15 and older in all provinces. Interviewees were chosen by sex, age, and residence (for the methodology see Karbaum 2008: 85–93). Qualitative research for this article, especially numerous expert interviews, was collected on two field trips, in particular from October to December 2014.

## **3. Social Change in Cambodia**

### **3.1 Religion**

Buddhism is the state religion; 95 per cent of the Khmer are Buddhists. It is not an exaggeration to claim that religion has shaped “the personality and the mentality of the Khmer people entirely” (Hansen 2004: 40). In contrast to other countries where Theravada is practiced, in Cambodia animist

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<sup>7</sup> Data analyzed in this article were collected by the Asian Barometer Project (2005-2008 and 2010-2012; <http://www.asianbarometer.org/>), which was co-directed by Professors Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu and received major funding from Taiwan’s Ministry of Education, Academia Sinica and National Taiwan University. The Asian Barometer Project Office is solely responsible for the data distribution. The author appreciates the assistance of the aforementioned institutes and individuals in providing data. The views expressed herein are the author’s own.

influences are widespread. The belief in ancestral spirits and ghosts is not a spiritual rivalry, but rather a form of coexistence and not opposed by the Buddhist community, the *sangha*. Seen from a functional perspective, and probably not unique to Cambodia, religion is designed to enable “the Khmer villager [...] to domesticate the unknown. He has acquired a whole catalogue of spirit and magic lore to guide him through his dealings with the invisible powers that surround him and to guide his everyday life in a world where the invisible powers also play a part” (Mabbett / Chandler 1995: 108).<sup>8</sup> At the same time, most Khmer also know the core Buddhist doctrine, in particular The Noble Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths.

Close symbiotic relations between religion and secular authority (mostly absolute power) have been typical in Cambodian society, beginning with the *devaraja* cult (translated as “god-king” or alternatively as “god of the kings”) during the Angkor Era (802–1431). According to Seanglim Bit, the “Buddhist concept of political authority assumed that given the imperfections of man a king was needed if social order was to prevail” (Bit 1991: 20). In return for theological legitimation, the *sangha* enjoyed the king’s political support. The mutual relationship of spiritual legitimization and political backing endured until 1975 when the Khmer Rouge assumed power and conditions worsened dramatically: Based on their ultra-communist ideology, monks were declared to be public enemies with the goal of eradicating all religious elements in society. By the time Vietnamese troops toppled the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, most monasteries, temples and libraries had been destroyed. Up to 80,000 monks had been murdered, reducing the total number Buddhist dignitaries to just 3,000 in the early 1980s (Harris 2005: 194).

The new regime, although composed of former Khmer Rouge cadres and committed to socialist ideology, promoted the successful restoration of Cambodian Buddhism, especially through donations of wealthy politicians and business men for the reconstruction of Buddhist pagodas. In return, organized Buddhism is widely regarded as politicized in favor of the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) of Prime Minister Hun Sen (Karbaum 2014). Tep Vong, Cambodia’s Great Supreme Patriarch of the Maha Nikaya sect, has held official functions within the political apparatus since the 1980s. Today, most monasteries and pagodas are aligned with the CPP, and the promotion of a Buddhist monk to abbot or above depends on his political loyalty. However, these close connections to the ruling party have reduced

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<sup>8</sup> One may assume that in society with a low level of education the ability to explain perceptions rationally is less pronounced and therefore, these invisible powers are typical concomitants of daily life.



theological substance and increased clerical conformism. In consequence, a Cambodian Buddhism has not exercised a moral or social component regarding political motivated violence, corruption, land-grabbing, human rights violations and other big or small injustices within the country for many years.

After parliamentary elections in 2013 at the latest, it became obvious that numerous young monks did not want to follow the official line any more. Most obvious, members of the Independent Monk Network for Social Justice (IMNSJ) participated in demonstrations against irregularities during the ballot and the government in general. Most of these monks also have a social agenda; e.g., they express solidarity with victims of land-grabbing, demand democratic reforms and document human rights violations. The Samakki Rainsey pagoda in Phnom Penh emerged as a refuge for dissidents in orange robes, although under suspicious surveillance and threatened by the regime (Dara / Peter 2015). In particular, disagreeable monks are exposed to legal persecution, defrocking and even physical violence.

Although this new decentralized movement of Buddhist monks is under extreme pressure of the government, it has already contributed to the change in religious values. These monks represent Buddhism with close connections to the people instead of the elites, with a clear morality, and an awareness of how Buddhism can contribute to the social development beyond pure rituals and liturgy. However, whereas a more independent Buddhism would reflect the spirit of the 1993 constitution, the current interrelations of the clergy and the regime correspond to Cambodian traditions. Today it seems that their persistence can only be reduced by a truly liberal government, ending the political grasp and strict control mechanisms of the regime.

Whereas changes in the self-understanding of Buddhism, its morality and ethical principles are obvious, the relatively few survey data available indicate only a slight decrease in religiousness from 2008 to 2012. However, there are considerable differences among urban Khmers with a sharp decline in people who claim to be very religious, while religiousness in rural areas appears to be constant (see Table 1).

### **3.2 Family cohesion**

Cambodia has been regarded as a post-war society for years. The experiences of 30 years of war, genocide and civil war have shaped a desolidarized society with a very low level of mutual trust (Table 2), a low sense of community, and strong social capital only within families; this has changed little in the last three decades (Ou / Kim 2013: 189–190). In add-

TABLE 1: Religiousness in the self-perception of Buddhist believers (in %)

	Total		Rural		Urban	
	2008	2012	2008	2012	2008	2012
very religious	60.7	57.4	61.2	61.0	59.0	44.8
moderately or somewhat religious	39.3	42.6	38.8	39.0	41.0	55.2
N	975	1149	763	897	212	252

Source: Asian Barometer Survey

ition to the terror regime of the Khmer Rouge – who tried to destroy the family as a social entity – five major regime changes since the 1950s gave the state an image of transiency. Although most Cambodians have enjoyed a stability since the 1990s that is only comparable to Prince Sihanouk’s reign sixty years ago, an individual cannot rely on the state in a case of emergency. Public goods and services are limited and social welfare mechanisms in cases of unemployment, illness, or for elderly people do not exist. Hence, for the vast majority of Cambodians, the family (*kruasa*) is the most important social group in their whole life, reflected by various pro-family attitudes (Table 3).

TABLE 2: Trust in other people (in %)

General speaking, would you say...	2008	2012
most people can be trusted	7.4	11.5
you must be very careful when dealing with others	92.6	88.5
N	998	1099

Source: Asian Barometer Survey

Almost 50 years ago May Ebihara (1968: 93) noted that the meaning of kinship relations as pillars of peasant cooperation in Cambodian villages is not as pronounced as in other cultures. Others stated later that “kinship is the most important base for interpersonal relationships in the village” (Ledgerwood / Vijghen 2002: 113), where only 10 per cent of all marriages

are formed with spouses from other villages (ibid: 112). In Cambodia, the nuclear family with parents and their children prevails rather than the extended household and can be regarded as the “cultural norm” (Demont / Heuveline 2008: 1), although weakening at the beginning of this century.<sup>9</sup>

Generally spoken, most families are partnerships of convenience with distinct economic expectations. The parents usually exercise enormous influence in the choice of the spouses of their children because a marriage is always an association of two families. Love is a rather romantic concept and a very minor motivation for marriages in Cambodia: in 2007, only 19.2 per cent interviewees agreed to the statement “When a man and a woman marry love should be the reason and not money”, whereas 48.8 per cent disagreed and about a third was undecided. However, when there is no emotional relationship between spouses, family life can also mean hardship; abuse and violence are directly related to this. And in cases of conflict, it is likely that men side with their own kin against the spouse; according to the Asian Barometer Survey of 2012, out of 1,199 respondents, 83.3 per cent agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement: “When a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is in the wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother.” Only 16.8 per cent disagreed (data from 2012, Asian Barometer Survey).

However, although this seems to be a serious burden for family cohesion in general, more data from the Asian Barometer Survey confirm the assumption that family values have not become less important (Table 4). Therefore, in the absence of state-run social welfare institutions, greater trust among the Khmers, and more social capital, families in Cambodia will retain their significance for at least the next generation – even if friendships<sup>10</sup> and other social subgroups beyond family bonds become more prevalent.

### **3.3 Gender roles and equality**

A general view on the state of women in Cambodian society is better than their position in families, although more women than men primarily define their role as within their families. Despite women’s equality under public law, Cambodian society still shows a gap between men and women.

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<sup>9</sup> In their article, the authors show an increase in extended families between 2000 and 2005 that is “hard to explain with a broad modernization framework that would associate traditional societies with extended families and modern ones with nuclear families” (Demont / Heuveline 2008: 14).

<sup>10</sup> Friendships and amicable relationships such as are common in western countries are still very rare in Cambodia.

TABLE 3: Attitudes toward the own family 2007 (in %; N = 1200)

Statement	I agree/ I totally agree	I agree somewhat	I don't agree/I don't agree at all	Don't know/ answer refused
My family is the most important thing for me. I do everything so that they can have a good life.	83.0	13.2	3.6	0.3
In my family we stick together and look after each other.	91.6	5.1	3.0	0.3
I get on with my whole family.	89.9	7.7	2.2	0.3
It is very important that young people respect their elders.	88.3	9.9	1.3	0.5
The children should look after their parents in old age.	90.9	6.8	1.5	0.8
My friends are more important to me than my family.	5.0	18.3	74.5	2.3

Source: Karbaum 2008: 265, 269

Traditionally, the Chbab Srey Code<sup>11</sup> purports idealistic moral conduct and behavior on the part of women in their relation to men and in public:

Women are to walk slowly and softly, be so quiet in their movements that one cannot hear the sound of their silk skirt rustling. While she is shy and must be protected, before marriage ideally never leaving the company of her relatives, she is also industrious. Women must know how to run a household and control its finances. She must act as an advisor to her husband as well as be his servant (Ledgerwood 2002).

<sup>11</sup> The analogy for men is the Chbab Pros Code. Until 2007, children learned both concepts at school.

TABLE 4: Indicators for family cohesion (in %)

Statement	2008			2012		
	Agree* (%)	Disagree* (%)	N	Agree* (%)	Disagree* (%)	N
For the sake of the family, the individual should put his personal interests second.	82.1	17.9	877	84.1	15.9	1192
Even if parents' demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask.	55.5	44.5	979	80.9	19.1	1200

\* somewhat/strongly

Source: Asian Barometer Survey

And Susan Lee (2006: 24) pointed out that the man is the undisputed head of his family „with nearly absolute powers over his wife, children and household”. Some observers even perceive “traditional gender disparities in Cambodian society”, in which “women have long been perceived as having a lower status than men” (Plischuk 2012: 383).

Especially in rural areas it is not uncommon that women who want to be respected by their environment have to prove their compliance with these values and norms. Role allocations appear to be fairly traditional with clear expectations for both sexes. Women usually orientate themselves toward their own family and manage the household. By doing this, inside the family women are usually more influential than their husbands. By contrast, their social status in public is defined through the status of their families, in particular their husband.<sup>12</sup>

Although these notions appear outdated (because they do not reflect reality after years of civil violence and terror) they have strongly influenced gender relations. At the latest the disastrous legacy of the Khmer Rouge made clear that Cambodia cannot ignore women's contribution to the general development in the economy and society. Whereas females are still drastically underrepresented in parliament and public offices, in other parts of society women have become the backbone of Cambodia's overall

<sup>12</sup> For example, Bun Rany, president of the Cambodian Red Cross and wife of the prime minister, is often called Bun Rany Hun Sen on TV.

development, first and foremost in the economy. Cambodia's wealth beyond the selling of public assets depends on women: 90 per cent of some 700,000 garment workers are female, and textiles account for 85 per cent of Cambodia's overall exports.<sup>13</sup> Women also dominate the workforce in retail, handicrafts, and education. The first economic census of 2011 confirms the assumption that women have become Cambodia's economic engine: Nearly two thirds of about 500,000 registered businesses in the country – 80 per cent are micro businesses with two or less employees – were headed by women (Passi 2013).

Even though Cambodia performs better – compared to the assessment of overall development – in the gender inequality index of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2014b: 174), sexual abuse remains a major concern in women's general safety. Different sources suggest that gang rape is widely accepted among Cambodian men (Hruby 2013; UNIFEM et al. 2004: 115), indicating the persistence of a gender gap in Cambodia.

TABLE 5: Attitudes and perceptions about women 2007 (in %)

Statement	Yes	No	Don't know/ answer refused	N
Married women should always do what their husbands say.	32.4	60.1	7.5	1194
Compared to men, women's life is much more difficult.	78.2	13.0	8.8	1199
When a husband hits and hurts his wife very strongly he must go to prison.	81.6	13.3	5.1	1199
I wish more women will become province governors, members of parliament or ministers in Cambodia.	77.2	12.1	10.7	1198

Source: Karbaum 2008: 267 (568 men (47.3%) and 632 women (52.7%) participated in this survey; this reflects the gender ratio of this age group exactly)

<sup>13</sup> However, the very fact that at the same time nearly all union leaders are men illustrates that Cambodia is still far from gender equality.

Although qualitative research on ongoing emancipation of Cambodian women is extensive, data are insufficient to measure any evolution of values. At the very least, the snapshot survey from 2007 rejects the assumption of a chauvinistic society (Table 5). The Asian Barometer Survey also indicates that a stable majority of Cambodians welcome more females in politics.<sup>14</sup> Beyond government and party politics women are indeed increasingly active politically, as seen during land disputes (LICADHO 2014) or with regard to women who are active within civil society organizations and as social entrepreneurs in service delivery by non-governmental organizations.

### 3.4 Hierarchical social order

Similar to families, Cambodian society as a whole is organized in a very hierarchic way and “the characteristics of authoritarianism flow throughout the social order” (Bit 1991: 61–62). This principle of hierarchy is deeply fixed in virtually all social interactions and has significantly shaped the Khmer language and main gestures.<sup>15</sup> Table 6 shows the role of an individual’s age in determining the hierarchical relationship in interpersonal interactions. Similar to other Southeast and East Asian societies, the older people are in Cambodia, the higher their position is within the formal hierarchy. For many Khmer it is crucial for their self-image to know their individual position in the hierarchy within their community and, even better, to improve their position, which is mostly defined by the socio-economic status. For those on top it is even more important to ensure that people do not question this hierarchy because it guarantees subordination.

Under the monarchy until 1970 social hierarchies were very stable. After the short intermezzo of the Khmer Republic under Lon Nol until 1975, the Khmer Rouge tried to destroy these traditional patterns of hierarchy only to implement an even stricter, criminal and murderous social order. After-

<sup>14</sup> In 2012, 83.2% of 1,197 interviewees disagreed with the statement “Women should not be involved in politics as much as men”, whereas 16.8% agreed (data from Asian Barometer Survey).

<sup>15</sup> There are six types of the formal *sampeah* greeting when people put their hands together, palms inwards, and bow their head. The higher the position of the counterpart, as higher people have to raise their hands on the head, in front of their face or the breast. The types are: *sampeah preah put* (for the holy Buddha only, for example in front of statues in pagodas), *sampeah preah moha ksat* (for monks, the king and his closest relatives), *sampeah miethda beyda* (for a person’s parents and grandparents, but only on ritual occasions), *sampeah neak mern tanak bonsak* (for ministers, senior government officials and other persons with official titles), *sampeah neak mern tanak smao knier* (common among people with equal status), and *sampeah neak mern ayuk diejch chieng* (the response to youngsters who are expected to greet older people first).

wards, the old hierarchies recovered in parts, but could never regain their significance. Since the 1980s, new elites have emerged and introduced new hierarchies, based on traditional concepts of patron-client-relations (Gottesman 2003: 299). In general, these patterns are not very different from the archetype, but have been introduced by new stakeholders. Although traditional or ritual hierarchies that put the king, monks, titulars, and elderly at the top still exist, de facto they have been superseded by those defined by the new ruling elites. In this regard, the granting of official titles and the bloated administration with much more leading positions than necessary for an efficient government is likely an attempt to put this new hierarchy on a sustainable footing.

Survey data underline the assumption that hierarchies in social interaction not only persist, but have even gained strength in some regards within four years (Table 7), contradicting the assumption of modernization in Cambodia. Whereas attitudes toward strong hierarchic principles prevail, pluralism has a tough stand among the Khmer. One may explain this finding by a general wish for harmony and peace in society, rather than as evidence against diversity and freedom of expression in general. At least, to summarize, there is no indication of an erosion of traditional patterns or of a change in values away from hierarchic preferences.

### 3.5 Economics

To assess (socio-) economic values, it is crucial to understand the cultural concepts beyond entrepreneurship and profit-seeking. A major pillar of Buddhism is rebirth. To improve one's status in the next life – most people in Cambodia aspire to that –, a human being has to acquire as many as possible merits by doing good deeds, especially by donating to the poor, participating in religious ceremonies and developing a merciful attitude (*twö bonn*). In consequence, a rich or powerful individual at present must have been a good person in his/her previous life; the new life is the award. By contrast, poverty means punishment for misconduct in one's last life. In other words, only the individual is responsible for his/her socio-economic position; it is natural destiny and the reason why some are extremely poor and some are extremely rich. As seen in the data collected by the Asian Barometer Survey in 2012, among all Buddhist believers (N=1,149) a majority of 62.1 per cent agreed with the statement "Wealth and poverty, success and failure are all determined by fate.", whereas 37.9 per cent disagreed. Notably, agreement was only a little stronger among rural than urban Khmer, very religious than moderately or somewhat religious people, people who are 39 or older than younger people, and women than men.



TABLE 6: Hierarchies in interpersonal communication

Age difference	A person is...	How to address others*	How to be addressed by others
invisible	about the same age	<i>bong</i> (exception: women address men by using <i>puh</i> or <i>bong</i> plus prename or <i>bong pros</i> )	<i>bong</i> (exception: men are addressed by younger women as <i>puh</i> , <i>bong</i> plus prename or <i>bong pros</i> )
little (up to 10 years)	younger	<i>bong</i> (exception see above because <i>bong</i> is only used to address one's husband and one's siblings)	<i>oun</i> , <i>p'oun srey</i> as women, <i>p'oun pros</i> as a men or just the prename/nickname; <i>koun</i> as a child
	older	<i>oun</i> , <i>p'oun srey</i> (for women), <i>p'oun pros</i> (for men) or just the prename/nickname; <i>koun</i> for children	<i>bong</i> (exception see above because <i>bong</i> is only used to address one's husband and one's siblings)
moderate (10 to 25 years)	younger	persons who are younger than one's own parents: for men <i>puh</i> , for women <i>ming</i> ;  persons who are older than the own parents: men as <i>om (pros)</i> , women as <i>om (srey)</i> or <i>eeh</i>	<i>khmui</i> (when the prename is unknown), <i>mi-oun</i> or <i>khmui-srey</i> (in case of a personal relationship between women) and <i>khmui-pros</i> (in case of a personal relationship between men); <i>koun</i> as a child
	older	<i>khmui</i> (when the prename is unknown), <i>mi-oun</i> or <i>khmui-srey</i> (in case of a personal relationship between women) and <i>khmui-pros</i> (in case of a personal relationship between men); <i>koun</i> for children	<i>puh</i> or <i>om (pros)</i> as a man, <i>ming</i> , <i>om (srey)</i> or <i>eeh</i> as a woman
huge (dep. on the absolute age)	younger	men <i>ta</i> , women <i>yeay</i>	<i>Chaou</i>
	older	<i>Chaou</i>	<i>ta</i> as a man, <i>yeay</i> as a woman

\* To address others in a formal way, Khmer just add the prefix *neak* (for women) or *louk* (mostly for men, but not exclusive), e.g. *louk ta*, *neak ming*, *louk p'oun* (for younger monks) or *neak kru* (for female teachers). If somebody holds an honorary title, it is appropriate to mention it. Most important titles are: *Ey Oudom* (His Excellency), *Louk Chumdiv* (Her Excellency), *Oknha* (for wealthy entrepreneurs), and *Samdech* (for very senior politicians, normally translated as "the powerful").

Source: compiled by author

TABLE 7: Indicators for hierarchic attitudes and pluralism (in %)

Statement	2008			2012		
	Agree* (%)	Disagree* (%)	N	Agree* (%)	Disagree* (%)	N
Being a student, one should not question the authority of the teacher.	52.8	47.2	988	75.1	25.0	1196
A person should not insist on his own opinion if his co-workers disagree with him.	51.2	48.8	810	74.7	25.3	1187
If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic.	63.0	37.0	973	66.6	33.4	1191
Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups.	42.4	57.5	796	55.3	44.8	1183
Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions.	68.9	31.1	975	70.1	29.9	1193

\* somewhat/strongly

Source: Asian Barometer Survey

This mentality maybe helps us to understand why Cambodia today appears to be a turbo-capitalist state, where the rule of law is weak and the social welfare state limited to rudimentary accident insurance. Instead, the traditional concept of patronage and clientelism (Lemarchand / Legg 1972; Bourne 1986) still dominates (Roberts 2009), contributing to the image of a weak state. Albeit not neutral in a political sense, clientelism is widely accepted as a distribution mechanism in an environment where poverty and scarcity of resources play a major role. By contrast, there is hardly any indication that corruption – during the last years, Cambodia was regularly rated among the most corrupt countries of the world (e.g. Transparency International 2014) – enjoys similar legitimacy among the population (Nissen 2005: 2; Transparency International Cambodia 2015: 26ff.).

These living conditions have shaped people's behavior for the last decades. Most Cambodians experienced long periods struggling to ensure

their survival on a daily basis, normally with a focus on the own family. Their short-term orientation, the general distrust of other people and the inability to rely on the state and public goods have favored an economy in which businesspeople often tend to play zero-sum games rather than cooperate for win-win outcomes. Market economy structures are derogated by crony capitalism principles and a rent-seeking mentality that bind entrepreneurs to political elites. Most obviously, the plundering of natural resources for immediate nonrecurring gains corresponds to these attitudes and forms of behavior. In this regard, the decrease in the short-term orientations of Khmer people when dealing with others (Table 8) is a major step toward a more cooperative society. Yet the absolute level is still low because most people exhibit huge particularistic, materialistic and status-orientated attitudes and behavior, irrespective of whether rich or poor. Despite the positive setting of Buddhist morality, people with a notion of social responsibility and voluntarism are still a minority, but they prevail in civil society organizations, although in fact most Cambodian groups in the tertiary sector do not correspond to this type (Ou / Kim 2013).

TABLE 8: Short-term vs. long-term orientations of Khmer people in social interaction (in %)

Statement	Agree*	Disagree*	N
When dealing with others, developing a long-term relationship should be more important than securing one's immediate interests. (2008)	44.3	55.7	908
When dealing with others, one should not only focus on immediate interest but also plan for future. (2012)	84.6	15.5	1180

\* somewhat/strongly

Source: Asian Barometer Survey

### 3.6 Politics

Being an academic who cannot deny his normative attitude, I equate political values with values of liberty, equality, and checks and balances. On a more practical level, political values affect human rights, rule of law, social justice, participation and liberal democracy in particular. Regarding Cambodia – an authoritarian state, despite formal democratic institutions,

with a war-torn society and with very weak democratic traditions – it is an interesting question whether democratic values among the people have already emerged or not. As seen in Table 9, in 2007 a vast majority of interviewees agreed with the statements “in a democracy it is the duty of all citizens to participate in elections regularly” and “everybody should have the right to stand up for his (her) opinion even if the majority has another opinion”. At the same time, nearly two thirds agreed with the statements “in principle, all parties should have the same chance to come to power” and “a vital democracy is not imaginable without a political opposition.”

TABLE 9: Perception of democratic values, in percentages (N = 1200)

Statement	I agree/ I totally agree	I agree a little bit	I don't agree/ I don't agree at all	Don't know/ answer refused
In a democracy it is the duty of all citizens to participate in elections regularly.	87.1	7.9	2.6	2.4
In principle, all parties should have the same chance to come into power.	64.4	18.1	8.5	9.0
A vital democracy is not imaginable without a political opposition.	63.6	16.3	8.3	11.9
Everybody should have the right to stand up for his (her) opinion even the majority has another opinion.	79.5	12.3	3.9	4.3

Source: Karbaum 2008: 166

It is likely – yet not possible to prove – that post-ballot protests in 2013 were based not only on dissatisfaction with the government's performance, but also reflect these democratic values. However, there is still a huge gap between attitudes and behavior. Most demonstrations took place on week-ends with just some ten thousand participants, insufficient to prove the claim that they are directly linked to a significant change in political values among the Khmer people. Data from the Asian Barometer Survey confirm this assumption: although there is a clear majority of interviewees who prefer a

TABLE 10: Attitudes toward the form of government (in %)

Which of the following statements comes closest to your own opinion?		
	2008	2012
Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.	61.2	57.0
Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be better than a democracy.	8.3	13.0
For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democracy or not.	30.5	30.0
N	852	1185

Source: Asian Barometer Survey

TABLE 11: Preference of democracy or economic development (in %)

If you had to choose between democracy and economic development, which would you say is more important?		
	2008	2012
Economic development is definitely/somewhat more important	58.8	70.0
They are both equally important	14.3	3.7
Democracy is definitely/somewhat more important	26.9	26.3
N	941	1194

Source: Asian Barometer Survey

democracy to any other kind of government (Table 10); for a growing majority economic development is more important than democracy (Table 11). At the same time, in both 2008 and 2012 a stable minority of about 40 per cent would welcome a military junta in Cambodia (Table 12). Therefore, it seems quite obvious that the approval of fundamental political values does not influence people's notion of a concrete democratic regime.

This inconsistency has most likely arisen due to a general lack of education, increasing the possibility of elites manipulating democratic

institutions. In the previous chapters it became obvious that Cambodia's legacy of inner violence is noticeable in the high degree of politicization in almost all parts of society. The lack of trust – as discussed above – has impeded the emergence of a democratic “civic” culture and reduced the impact of the liberal constitution of 1993 to a formal façade (Karbaum 2012). Whereas political parties in consolidated democracies maintain a kind of partnership in competition, the immense distrust of Cambodian politicians among themselves has been the major obstacle to cooperation and consensus building. A mentality shaped by a “winner-takes-all political culture” (Chandler 1998: 43) has induced almost necessarily a political landscape with a strong hegemon. This position was captured by Prime Minister Hun Sen, notably through his control of Cambodia's main security forces. He has created a highly personalized regime in which endemic corruption and unlimited access to state resources ensures the loyalty of and discipline among his followers. Horizontal and vertical institutions that could limit executive power exist only on paper. Very few people are involved in decision-making processes. Politicians, including members of parliament, are responsible not to the public, but to their party leaders.

TABLE 12: Approval of a military junta, in percentages

Would you disapprove or approve of the following statement: “The army (military) should come in to govern the country”?		
	2008	2012
Approve/strongly approve	43.1	39.1
Disapprove/strongly disapprove	56.9	60.9
N	918	1187

Source: Asian Barometer Survey

By reaching an agreement in 2014 to end the political stalemate after the disputed parliamentary elections one year before, the ruling CPP and the oppositional Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) took a big step forward toward reducing distrust and confrontation. More a symbol than an institutional upgrade, the official recognition of the opposition – whose president Sam Rainsy was elevated to minority leader, a position formally equal to the prime minister – in 2014 and the so-called “culture of dialogue” between the two main parties may be an indicator that Cambodia is able to

overcome the traditional confrontation between its political elites. After adopting two new election laws and the establishment of the new bi-partisan National Election Committee (NEC)<sup>16</sup> in spring 2015, both parties showed their willingness and ability to reach a consensus even on contested policies. However, it is too early to exclude a political maneuver by the government, and the conciliation process is overshadowed by the CPP's willingness to use undemocratic methods to maintain power.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the self-interests of those who greatly benefit from corruption, rent-seeking and a culture of impunity are immense, leaving only a narrow opening for fundamental political reforms that may affect the hegemony of the ruling party.

#### **4. Main factors determining Khmer people's attitudes**

Attitudes, perceptions and types of behavior do not develop randomly and spontaneously. Most often, they correlate with sociostructural characteristics. An analysis of the data of 2012 showed that the variables age, sex, residence and socioeconomic status had little or no explanatory power – a clear indication of a very homogenous society. Instead, I found the strongest effect in two variables: education and residence. To measure these I first, divided interviewees in two groups on the basis of education: into those with six (completed primary education) or fewer years of schooling and those with more than six years, and second, two groups on the basis of a combined variable of residence (urban vs. rural) and age (18 to 38 vs. 39 plus). The result was four main groups with two antipodes of young-urban and old-rural interviewees.

As seen in Table 13, the probability of agreement with modern issues increases with the degree of education. This becomes most obvious with the statements “Wealth and poverty, success and failure are all determined by fate” (Cramér's  $V = 0.293$ ), “The army (military) should come in to govern the country” (0.244), and “Being a student, one should not question the authority of the teacher” (0.234). While the correlation with the other indicators is quite weak, there is most likely no interrelation with other indicators mentioned in this article. Given the perspective that the level of

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<sup>16</sup> The CPP and the CNRP each have four members in the NEC, and Hang Puthea – director of the well-respected election watchdog Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC) – was selected as the ninth and “neutral” member by the National Assembly.

<sup>17</sup> The arrest of an oppositional senator in August 2015 and long-term sentences against fourteen CNRP followers due to insurrection – both publicly demanded by the prime minister – led to an abrupt termination of the recent rapprochement shortly after a remarkable private get-together of Hun Sen, Sam Rainsy, and their families.

education is going to increase in the future, there is also some probability of a change in values toward modernity, yet not in all indicators. Table 14 offers a similar impression: Young interviewees living in urban areas more often tend to modern values – with one distinctive feature: They are much more likely to agree with the statement “Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups”. Therefore, it is possible that the wish for harmony is an integral part of modernization in Cambodia.

TABLE 13: The impact of education in 2012

Level and indicators	Interviewees with completed primary education or less (in %)	Interviewees with at least seven years school attendance (in %)	N	Cramér's V
Family cohesion: Interviewees who agree with the statement: “Even if parents’ demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask.”	86.9	71.2	1200	0.195
Gender roles and equality: Interviewees who disagree with the statement: “Women should not be involved in politics as much as men.”	79.0	90.0	1197	0.142
Hierarchical social order: Interviewees who agree with the statement: “Being a student, one should not question the authority of the teacher.”	83.0	62.1	1197	0.234
Hierarchical social order: Interviewees who agree with the statement: “Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions.”	75.5	61.3	1194	0.151



*Continued:*

Economics: Interviewees who agree with the statement: “Wealth and poverty, success and failure are all determined by fate” (Buddhists only).	73.3	44.1	1149	0.293
Politics: Interviewees who agree with the statement: “The army (military) should come in to govern the country.”	48.6	24.1	1187	0.244

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Source: based on data provided by the Asian Barometer Survey

## **5. Conclusion**

Although a lack of survey data before 2007 bars any statement about this period, the analysis suggests that Cambodia’s development has not induced change toward modernity yet (see Table 15 for particular findings). As seen in the data below, traditional conceptions about society, economy, and politics continue to dominate. In regard to the enormous exogenous efforts during the last 25 years, increased access to education and information and a shift in necessities (ensuring daily survival is no longer the top priority for most Khmer), the stability of traditional conceptions may surprise. However, as discussed in connection with family cohesion, certain attitudes and behavior patterns reflect not only cultural and historical imprinting, but are a rational substitute for the lack of public goods. In almost every case study discussed, the historical legacy of inner violence and extreme confrontation, and the current political motives to maintain political hegemony exercise enormous influence on the persistence of traditional patterns. Wherever this influence is low or almost nonexistent, modernization is taking place – as seen in a new self-awareness among and role conceptions of Cambodian women. In other words, by maintaining its hegemony, the influence of the current regime on the non-evolution of modern attitudes, perceptions and behavior is not equal to zero.

TABLE 14: The impact of residence and age in 2012

Level and indicators	Young and urban interviewees (in %)	Old and rural interviewees (in %)	N	Cramér's V
Religion: Interviewees who confessed to be very religious (Buddhists only).	35.8	63.4	555	0.240
Gender roles and equality: Interviewees who disagree with the statement: "Women should not be involved in politics as much as men."	90.5	79.7	580	0.123
Hierarchical social order: Interviewees who agree with the statement: "Being a student, one should not question the authority of the teacher."	60.5	77.2	581	0.163
Hierarchical social order: Interviewees who agree with the statement: "Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions."	62.1	74.2	579	0.116
Hierarchical social order: Interviewees who agree with the statement: "Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups."	68.7	50.2	573	0.162
Hierarchical social order: Interviewees who agree with the statement: "Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups."	68.7	50.2	573	0.162

*Continued:*

Economics: Interviewees who agree with the statement: “Wealth and poverty, success and failure are all determined by fate” (Buddhists only).	50.0	71.5	553	0.195
Politics: Interviewees who agree with the statement: “The army (military) should come in to govern the country.”	19.3	48.0	576	0.254

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Source: based on data provided by the Asian Barometer Survey

However, I do not predict a general change in values following a regime change. Although it is likely that the degree of education – the most influential independent variable on attitudes and perceptions – will continue to grow in the next decades, this growth will also reflect some cultural characteristics. I assume that the wish for harmony in society is only one example of a typical Khmer sense of pluralism. Yet, its impact on major democratic principles – freedom of expression and association – is widely unexplored. In addition, one should not underestimate the effect of strong materialist attitudes among the Khmer people. Hence, post-material attitudes – such as values of autonomy and self-expression – will hardly win recognition in the coming years.

With regard to theoretical approaches, it is obvious that they lack cultural components that facilitate an understanding of social change beyond the western hemisphere. While these concepts are useful tools to describe on-going changes in values, they do not have sufficient explanatory power to understand causalities in ongoing processes. It is the multicollinearity in this complex that led Bhandari and Yasunobu (2009: 19) to state that “appropriate social values enhance social development, and social development, in turn, transforms various value systems of society. This implies a dynamic relationship between social change and social development”. With such understanding, the predictive potential of any approach is limited to very common and unspecific assertions.

As expected, this study only offers limited evidence about whether values in Cambodia converge as a result of modernization or persist despite the overall socioeconomic development. It is not satisfactory to conclude

rather vaguely that “Cambodian” modernity will be colored by certain cultural characteristics, yet there are neither theoretical nor empirical models that promise more prognostic potential.

TABLE 15: Modernization trends in Cambodia

Case study	Indicator for modernization	Consolidated findings
Religion	(1) Close relationship between state actors and the clergy breaks down	slight shift toward modern patterns
	(2) Secular institutions, attitudes and behavior gain more significance over religious values	constant
Family cohesion	Family cohesion decreases in favor of other interpersonal ties beyond kinship relations	slight shift toward traditional patterns
Gender roles and equality	New role conceptions for women	shift toward modern patterns
Hierarchical social order	Hierarchical patterns in interpersonal relationships erode	constant
Economics	(1) Formal trade-offs gain significance	constant
	(2) A notion of social responsibility increases among entrepreneurs	constant
Politics	increased significance of democratic institutions and a growing acceptance of liberal values among both the people and the elites	slight shift toward modern patterns

Source: based on data provided by the Asian Barometer Survey

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