Political subjectivity in Cambodia

Political subjectivity is the process during which an individual goes from being an object of politics to a political subject with his or her own particular orientations toward the sources and form of power. Cambodian political life provides the perfect lens through which to examine this process, because the dense network of patronage that connects the political and economic elite of Cambodia with the masses offers sharp examples of how political subjects may be formed.

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Subjection

Political theorists have long sought to explain subjectivation, i.e. the way in which political power is exerted and the conditions that facilitate the emergence of political subjects. A classical distinction between the “sensible” and the “insensible” has been utilized to highlight the distribution of the sensible, and how political subjects orientate themselves in relation to the dominant power structures in society. In Rancière’s theory, the policing function of the polity goes beyond what we normally understand as the provision of security and serves to enforce what he describes as the “distribution of the sensible”, that is, “the general laws that draw the lines of sight, forms of speech, and estimations of a body’s capacity.”

In other words, the police control the phenomenal life of the political community, and what is visible and audible where before they had been ignored, a redistribution of the sensible, making themselves visible and audible where before they had been invisible, and assert their claims to the benefits of social life.

In Cambodia the ethnic Vietnamese minority counts as the part of no part given their exclusion from citizenship under the Cambodian Constitution. This prevents them from accessing the services and rights enjoyed by citizens.

During the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, following the end of the Khmer Rouge’s genocidal revolution, the ethnic Vietnamese minority failed to push for their right to Cambodian citizenship, and today, despite their long residency, they retain the status of illegal aliens. Their situation following the withdrawal of the Vietnamese occupation army quickly deteriorated, and the Cambodian government has even lost its tolerance for their precarious existence in their floating villages on the Tonle Sap.

Rather than being the focus around which the Cambodian people have pushed for political change, the ethnic Vietnamese minority has instead functioned as a scapegoat for xenophobic Cambodian politicians to propagate anti-Vietnamese paranoia, including narratives of the Vietnamese theft of Cambodian land. Indeed, some Cambodian opposition leaders have attracted popular support by highlighting Prime Minister Hun Sen and the CPP’s long association with the Vietnamese Communist Party, under whose tutelage during the Vietnamese occupation they ascended to power. Anti-Vietnamese sentiment hence continues to have cultural and political salience in Cambodia, and the CPP has responded by bowing to public sentiment and cracking down on the ethnic Vietnamese minority. While the long-standing hatred of Vietnamese among Cambodians has led some to across from the political spectrum, the consequences for the ethnic Vietnamese minority have been arrests, deportations, and the scuttling of their floating villages.

Future political change thus will have to come from some other source, perhaps the demographic changes arising from Cambodia’s ongoing encounter with global flows of investment and trade.

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References

6 Ibid., Tanke, J.J., p.62.
13 Ibid., Tanke, J.J., p.43.

Above: the funeral procession of Kem Ley, who was murdered in 2013, makes its way through Takeo province. Photo by Heng Chivoan/The Phnom Penh Post.

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Through their participation in the funeral proceedings, of which the government’s escalating threats eventually led some of the funeral committee members to leave Cambodia, the Cambodian partisans hence achieved a redistribution of the sensible, making visible and audible where before they had been invisible, and asserting their claims to the benefits of social life.