Fishing and politics in Cambodia

As we shall see, the government previously awarded a system of exclusive fishing lots that had been in use for over a century. In 2012, these lots were abolished, opening up the fishing grounds to the community at large. The abolition of the Tonle Sap fishing lot system is a rare example of a government policy that was greeted with jubilation by the locals. The new approach, on the surface, appears to have decreased the dominance of the state and reinstated certain freedoms to the public. Should this shift be viewed as part of the decentralization and democratization of resource governance, or should we see something else in this move? As we observe the increasing tendency of state control over revenue-generating resources such as oil, it is illuminating to see how politics matters in governing resources that are apparently lucrative through the eyes of the state.

Cambodia has a population of 18 million people, out of which four million, or 25 percent, have a direct or indirect stake in fishing on the lake.1 The government was anxious to keep a lid on politically sensitive conflicts between the small-scale fishermen, who make up the vast majority of the four million stakeholders, and the smaller group of fishing lot owners, a smaller group numbering in the dozens. Whilst relatively minor in terms of tax revenue, the issue had potentially dramatic political ramifications. Around the turn of the millennium, Cambodia was going through a decentralization process accelerated by a new legislation promoting communal elections and the enactment of the Law on Commune/Sangkat Administrative Management in 2001. Prior to this law, municipal leaders assumed seats of local government. From 2002 onward, for the first time, Cambodians across the country elected their community representatives directly. Further local elections based on the new laws took place in 2007 and 2012, bringing victory to the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP). The first commune council elections in 2002 were not only a milestone in the country’s democratization process but also a symbol of decentralization.

People in Southeast Asia earn a livelihood in a variety of ways. Certain nomadic groups live on or near the water, relocating from place to place to follow migrating fish. The largest of these groups live by Tonle Sap Lake, an enormous body of fresh water in Cambodia. In Cambodia, as elsewhere, water usage is governed partly by national policies. As we shall see, however, governance of water is necessarily the governance of people whose lives are connected with such water. In this context, Tonle Sap has historically been the target of political intervention mainly regarding who gets what from the resources available from the lake. This article examines how water resources can serve as an effective tool for political influence. By examining the case of policy change by the Cambodian government in relation to Tonle Sap Lake, I argue for the importance of providing local people with the resources and capacities to take care of their surroundings once governed by the state.

In a highly restrictive political environment like Cambodia, political spaces for debate among various party members, and key matters of local policy are often discussed. By the 2010s, the power of the CPP in these councils was absolute and unchallenged, despite occasional “reforms” of the election system. Therefore, if the ruling party already enjoyed such a solid power base, why did it intervene in Tonle Sap’s fisheries arrangements? Is it simply because the government was interested in conserving the fishery resources in the lake? Or does the lake potentially serve as leverage for political purposes?

The Tonle Sap ecosystem

Before we dig into the governance issue, let us clarify the ecological context. Tonle Sap, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia, is a vast expanse of water that stretches in all directions as far as the eye can see. An estimated 1.7 million people make their home on the lake, spread out across over 1,500 villages.2 What makes Tonle Sap unique is the fluidity of its boundaries. In the rainy season, the lake swells to several times its dry-season size. Lake dwellers relocate as the tides slowly shift, dividing their time between farming and fishing as the seasons change. Such a lifestyle is astonishing to the eyes of a city-dweller, where one’s “residence” is usually a more or less fixed location.

Lake dwellers have good reason to remain close to these shifting shores. The climate is pleasant all year round, and fish are (or at least used to be) available in abundance, removing the threat of famine. Communities around the lake also encompass schools, health centers, and other infrastructure, all built on stilts. Anyone with a boat can find life’s necessities on Tonle Sap Lake, and the lake dwellers have long enjoyed the freedom to live and work there.

What makes Tonle Sap unique is the fact that the size and location of these supposedly distinct areas change as the lake floods. Tonle Sap expands dramatically during the rainy season, as Figure 2 shows, and this annual transformation calls for a complex system of resource management. Over the last few decades, Tonle Sap has been affected by population growth, urbanization, deforestation, and hydropower demand, not to mention the impacts of climate change causing scarcity of water in the region. On March 12, 2012, the Cambodian government announced a drastic policy shift, and the century-old fishing lot system was abolished. This had profound effects on the economically and environmentally valuable ecosystem of Tonle Sap Lake. While the government had already started to reduce the total area of fishing lots around the turn of the millennium, the total abolition of the system had been politically inconceivable. Initially welcomed by the small-scale fishers subsisting on the Tonle Sap fishing resources, the change also led to a rapid decline in fishing stocks. This came on top of other problems caused by or worsened by the El Niño phenomenon: fish in Tonle Sap were becoming smaller in size, and biodiversity was suffering.3

The changing fishing system

Tonle Sap’s fishing lot system dates back to the 19th century, when the government wanted to commercialize fisheries on the lake. The system was supposed to benefit all of the people. At that time, Cambodia was still a French protectorate, and marine products made up the bulk of the country’s exports. Eighty percent of these marine products were salted and dried fish, mostly catfish caught in Tonle Sap. This fish was eaten around the world, including Europe, where the fish was highly prized by the French.4 Adhémar Leclère, who held a key position in the French administration near the end of the 19th century, observed that during the reign of King Ang Doung (1890-1903), the fishing rights to particular locations were usually granted for free. This changed when King Norodom (1860-1904) began financial leasing of fishing rights to fund the construction of a royal palace in Phnom Penh. Fishing along the shores of Tonle Sap, however, remained free for everyone at that time. King Norodom accumulated his wealth by selling monopoly rights to Chinese entrepreneurs, his chief trading partners.5

Between 1970 and 1979, the rise and subsequent fall of the Khmer Rouge triggered a civil war that greatly affected the Tonle Sap area. The fishing lot system plunged into chaos. For nearly two decades, fishing activities, Pol Pot’s regime forced the people to work the rice fields in cooperative units based on communist ideals. Some Khmer Rouge cadres may have continued fishing in Kompong Chhnang Province, but we know very little about events in the lake area during this period. Certainly, any commercial fishing in Tonle Sap was virtually non-existent for those ten years, and by the time operations resumed in the 1980s, the fishing grounds were unsurprisingly richer than ever.

The re-introduction of the fishing lot system in 1987 marked a turning point in the history of Tonle Sap. In theory, fishing lots were to be auctioned off to the highest bidder at regular intervals, but the same fishing lots were frequently passed over and over by the same group of politically well-connected fishermen. fishermen rarely adhered to the certificate guidelines. For example, it was prohibited to subdivide the fishing lots, yet the vast majority of them ended up being exploited by multiple extralegal subcontractors. Furthermore, local officials often asked for bribes and various perks for granting exclusive fishing rights to lot owners.

The Cambodian government’s first major intervention into the Tonle Sap system was in 2000, when it reduced the total area of fishing lots on the lake by 56 percent. Then, in 2012, the system was abolished entirely. According to an official from the Fisheries Administration in 2012, the government decided to reduce the size of the fishing area by almost half of the area that had been essentially privatized as fishing lots, allocating it as an open-access resource to be used by all fishermen in cooperation with local communities. In practice, the reduction of the fishing area previously taken up by fishing lots was turned over to the community while the rest (53.63 percent) became state-designated and conservation areas for the protection of Tonle Sap’s ecosystem.
Why did the government relinquish its control over fishing lots?

There are several arguments as to why the Cambodian government decided to open up fishing lots. Firstly, the administrative incentive of the state was a factor. There are oil and gas reserves under Tonle Sap Lake. For the government, the first step in securing control over the area was to dismantle the system that provided rights to private entities over parts of the lake and to establish itself as the main beneficiary of future revenues from the exploitation of these subterranean resources. However, the profitability of the still-hypothetical oil and gas exploitation remains to be determined, as there are no concrete plans to develop these reserves. Though plausible, it is difficult to identify a clear link between the abdication of the fishing lot system and plans for future resource development. 

Secondly, the main beneficiaries of the abdication – the small-scale fishermen – also argued that the government sought to distribute natural resource revenues and the ensuing political stability, hoped to gain support from a broader sector of the country’s population in and around the lake. This explanation raises the possibility that, instead of attracting voters with subsidies, infrastructure projects, and other gifts that confer direct economic benefits (instead of losing taxes), the government is trying to achieve its political goals by promoting grander objectives like reducing inequality to achieve its political goals by promoting its political legitimacy.

Negatively, the government used the lake as a means of accomplishing a different objective – namely, political support to the party. While Cambodia is, in essence, a single-party state, political parties and officials have different attitudes and expectations toward Tonle Sap, depending on their position and associated vested interests. The situation around Tonle Sap involves multiple government agencies – primarily the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, but also the Ministry of Environment, and the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries has jurisdiction over fisheries in the fishing lots. The Ministry of Environment has jurisdiction over the protected areas, especially with the aim of biodiversity preservation. The Ministry of Water Resources, and Meteorology, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries had jurisdiction over fisheries in the fishing lots. 

As mentioned earlier, the Fisheries Administration benefited from state protection with fishing lot owners. For example, fishing lot owners may offer accommodations to politicians and officials when they visit local areas. There is always a risk that such connections lead to the corruption of such officials. Thus, it makes sense that the government would be eager to sniff out the escalating conflicts between fishing lot owners who are at a loss with help from the government’s support, and the government in need of the散布 throughout Cambodia. In the past 2000 period, the government has made a number of efforts to create space for ambiguity, which is now becoming an obstacle to the government’s stated goal of reducing inequality and protecting natural resources. Tonle Sap was a means to fund development programs, which operated specifically on the logic of exclusion and, later, by the delegation of power to communities (which is not the same as nationalization). The result has been mounting disputes between villagers and those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of this shared resource. 

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Furthermore, he asserted that the Tonle Sap fisheries contribute about 1.5 million USD to the government’s coffers every year. Given that the economy had been maintaining a growth rate of over 6 percent for several years, the government was intent on the mentioned area. In 2015, the fisheries sector, which encompasses industrial, household, and open field fisheries, contributed to about eight percent of the GDP. According to prime minister Hun Sen’s statement on March 8, 2015, “the fishing sector was involved in industrial-scale operations, and this small cluster generated about 400 million USD in revenue.” The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries had jurisdiction over the protected areas, especially with the aim of biodiversity preservation. The Ministry of Water Resources, and Meteorology, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries have jurisdiction over fisheries in the fishing lots. The Ministry of Environment has jurisdiction over the protected areas, especially with the aim of biodiversity preservation. The Ministry of Water Resources, and Meteorology, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries have jurisdiction over fisheries in the fishing lots.

Most fishing lots have been designated as communal fishing grounds and protected areas. Yet this raises another problem: who will manage them and how? Many community fisheries are considered to be managed by the government they govern their fishing grounds properly. It remains to be seen, however, how successfully the government intends to do this. In other words, the government’s push for a full-scale investigation into the problem in 2011 was seen as an expression of Hun Sen’s fear of the failure of the Fisheries Administration to deal with the situation.

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Applying solutions under the label of redistribution of access to resources abroad would significantly contribute to the state’s hidden aims. I argue that the Cambodian government is willing to intervene in Tonle Sap because millions of people depend on the lake’s fish for subsistence. Given that Tonle Sap remains relatively marginal in terms of overall fish stocks, the tax revenue and economic production, implementing a popular fisheries policy on the government has been an easy way for the state to gratify at least a fourth of its citizens. It is hardly a coincidence that Hun Sen’s government has pushed its successful public policies in the past few years. Whether the privatization of common resources is preferable to communal fisheries is now a matter of debate. 

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Notes

Fig. 2: The Tonle Sap Lake ecosystem (Source: Corperman, Webb, and O’Connor. “A watershed moment for the announced community waterfowl roosting areas for the Tonle Sap Lake may boost wetland species abundance in the lake and increase the wetland diversity in the surrounding catchment area.”)