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Global Islam and Political Patronage: Examining the Rise of Muslim Politics in Cambodia

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Abstract

This article seeks to study Muslim political activism in Cambodia, a predominantly Buddhist-Monarch state in mainland Southeast Asia that is often considered a semi-authoritarian regime. Cambodia's Muslim community constitutes a minority. However, they have actively participated in formal politics, aligning themselves with both the ruling and opposition parties. This engagement has culminated in several Muslim individuals sit in political positions within the government. This article is grounded in fieldwork conducted during 2017-2018, complemented by up-to-date information obtained from desk research and online interviews with research subjects. This article argues that the current wave of Muslim political activism in Cambodia can be seen as a continuation of the historical patron-client relationship between Muslims and local rulers.

Keywords: Muslim politics, global Islam, Islam in Cambodia, political patronage

Introduction

Former Cambodian Prime Minister, Hun Sen, who held his position from 1985 until 2023 as one of the world's longest-serving prime ministers, is known to have made statements advocating for increased Muslim representation in government. He proposed that in the second level of administrative units – that is, section (*Khan*), municipality (*Krong*), and district (*Srok*)¹ – with significant Muslim populations, there should be a deputy governor who is Muslim. Additionally, Hun Sen stressed the importance of Muslims developing the necessary skills and qualifications to fulfill these roles effectively, aligning with the government's policy of promoting diversity and inclusivity in leadership positions.² Following this, several Muslim individuals have been officially appointed as deputy governors in various provinces, cities, districts, and khans across Cambodia.³

¹ In Cambodia, there are five levels of administration. The first level is autonomous municipality, which covers the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, and 25 provinces. Second levels comprise three types of administration: *Khan*, *Krong*, and *Srok*. The second level in Phnom Penh is called *Khan* (section), while in the other provinces divided into *Krong* (municipality) and *Srok* (district). The third administrative units sit under *Khan* and *Krong*, called *Sangkat* (quarter), while under *Srok* sits *Khum* (commune). The fourth and fifth levels of administration are *Phum* (village) and *Krom* (block).

² (Selected Speech Samdech Techo Hun Sen, at the Closing Session of the Annual Review Conference Summarizing the Works and Achievements in 2021 and Work Guidelines for 2022 of the Ministry of Interior [Unofficial Translation] 2022)

³ The letters of appointment were posted in the Facebook wall of the Cambodian Muslim Media Center: https://web.facebook.com/cammcenter/?_rdc=1&_rdr

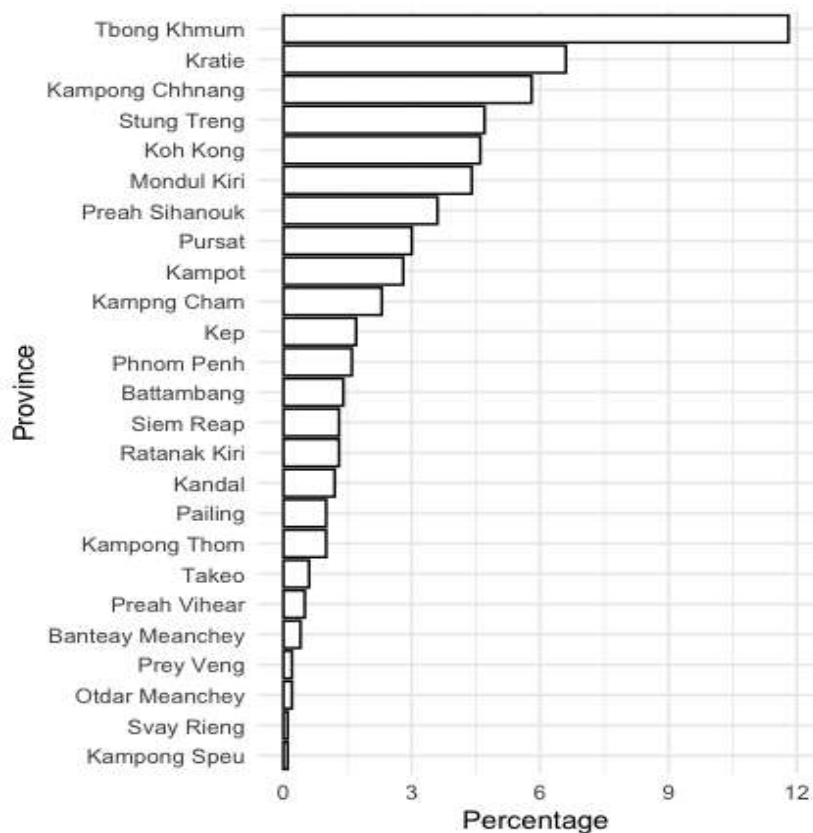


Figure 1. The Percentage Distribution of Muslims for Each Province in Cambodia, 2022.

Cambodia is officially recognised as a Buddhist country,⁴ with Buddhism being followed by approximately 97 percent of the population. In contrast, Muslims comprise about 2 percent of the population, or around 311,000 of Cambodia’s 15 million people. The province with the highest percentage of Muslims is Tbong Khmum, where Muslims represent 11.8 percent (approximately 92,000 people) and constitute

⁴ In article 43 of Cambodia’s Constitution of 1993 with Amendments through 2008 stated that “Buddhism shall be the religion of the State”. (Cambodia’s Constitution of 1993 with Amendments through 2008 n.d.)

approximately one quarter to one third of the country's total Muslim population (see Figure 1).⁵

Muslims in Cambodia are not monolithic, and can be differentiated based on ethnicity and religious sect. Ethnically, the majority of Cambodian Muslims are Chams and Chvea, representing 80 and 20 percent, respectively.⁶ The Chams are the descendants of Champa, the former early kingdom located in the south-coastal region of Vietnam today, who mainly migrated to Cambodia due to the fall of their kingdom. Chvea people are claimed as having “descent from unions between Malay settlers and Khmer local women”; they are also referred to as ‘Malay’ people.⁷ Regarding religious differences, there are two separate Islamic communities. First, there are adherents of Sunni Islam, who follow similar practices to the Islamic teaching and rituals practiced by most Southeast Asian Muslims, especially the Shafi'i school of Islamic law (*Mazhab Syafi'i*).⁸ They constitute approximately 90 percent of the Muslim population in Cambodia. The latter Islamic communities are headed by the *Oknha Khmour* (‘Venerable Master’) Kan Imam San, and are known as the community of Imam San. This community was constructed through a long process of what Bruckmayr described as ‘Jawisation’, which occurred between the mid-19th century and the early 1970s. This Islamic community constitutes 10 percent of Cambodia's Muslim population and has a distinct feature of religiosity compared to the Cham Muslim majority.⁹

Both forms of Islam in Cambodia – that is, Sunni Islam and the Imam San Group – have their respective organisations dedicated to serving their communities. Notably, the Cambodian state officially recognises the representatives of both groups simultaneously. For Sunni Islam, Sos Kamry holds the position of Mufti of Cambodia. He serves as the head of Cambodia's Highest Islamic Council of Religious Affairs (HICIRAC),

⁵ General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019 2020, 23

⁶ Eng 2013, 13

⁷ Bruckmayr 2019, 2–3

⁸ Bakti 2009

⁹ Bruckmayr 2017, 2019, 2

which is responsible for overseeing religious matters and affairs related to Sunni Islam in Cambodia. On the other hand, the *Oknha Khnour* leads the Islamic Community of Imam San, representing the followers of the Imam San Group.¹⁰ The state's recognition of both Sunni Islam and the Imam San Group reflects Cambodia's commitment to religious pluralism and protecting the rights of various religious communities within the country.

This article investigates the factors that enable Cambodian Muslims to engage in political activism and attain high political positions in a non-Muslim country. It considers the socio-historical aspects and interconnectedness to the Muslim world as the driving forces of Muslims to engage in Cambodian politics. There have been some discussions on Islam or Muslim in Cambodia, mostly related to its history and tradition,¹¹ and numerous studies have been conducted on the identity of the Cham people and their relation to Islam.¹² Recent discussion also focuses on Islamic education¹³ and the mushrooming of local Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their international links.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is a conspicuous dearth of extensive scholarly investigations into Muslim politics within the country. Contemporary research efforts have primarily concentrated on aspects such as the historical trajectory of Cambodian Muslims, the dynamics of Islamic education, and international connections. This article aspires to make a meaningful contribution to the expansive academic dialogue concerning minority Muslim communities and their engagement in political activism under the governance of non-Muslim authorities, a subject matter heretofore perceived as extending beyond the conventional perspective of the classical *ulama*. In their doctrinal teachings, the early *ulama* sternly discouraged Muslims from dwelling in

¹⁰ The Imam San Group is a non-mainstream Muslim community in Cambodia, and have different tradition and rituals to Sunni Muslims. More detail in Bruckmayr 2017

¹¹ See more: Weber, 2015; Okawa, 2014; Eng, 2013; Musa, 2012; Bruckmayr, 2010; So, 2008; Osman, 2007; Kersten, 2006; Taouti, 1982

¹² See more on Manira, 2019; Maunati; Sari, 2014; Abdullah, 2010; Abdullah, 2009

¹³ Musa, 2012; Musa, 2011; Blengli, 2009; Bakti, 2008

regions governed by non-Muslim rulers and even cautioned against brief sojourns within non-Muslim territories. This article endeavours to inaugurate a novel discourse that delves into the intricate dynamics characterising the relationship between Muslims, who constitute a minority residing amidst predominantly non-Muslim populations, and the non-Muslim authorities presiding over these domains.¹⁴

This article starts with a brief overview of the socio-political history of the relationship between Muslims and local rulers in Cambodia, which goes back to when Muslims first came to Cambodia, mainly through the big cluster of Cham Muslims who arrived from Champa (present-day south-central coast of Vietnam), after their land had been annexed in around the 14th to 15th centuries.¹⁵ Muslims and local rulers are intertwined in many relationships, such as patron-client relationships, as fellow believers, and kinship relationships. However, the patron-client system powerfully works on political pathways to give Muslims official positions in government. In the second part of the discussion, I take into account the global Muslim world as the new patron of Cambodian Muslims, providing Muslim political muscle in national Cambodian politics. I delve into how global aid has helped create Muslim figures who are highly regarded within the grassroots Muslim community and have gained respect even within the upper echelons of the non-Muslim government. This, in turn, has enhanced their political popularity in electoral politics. Ultimately, this discussion leads to the presentation of a new perspective on Muslim politics in Cambodia, focusing on the intricate relationships between Muslims, the government, and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the ruling party that enjoys significant support from most Cambodian Muslims.

¹⁴ Fadl 1994

¹⁵ Tarling 1992, 153–56

Muslims in Cambodian Socio-Political History

Exploring socio-religious history is crucial for understanding the complexities of the relationships between Muslims and local rulers within the Khmer Kingdom, which is now the state of the Kingdom of Cambodia. This historical perspective highlights various interpretations and controversies surrounding the acceptance of Muslims as foreign migrants. These interpretations often revolve around concepts like patron-client relationships, shared faith in Islam, and even blood lineage. By addressing this socio-religious history, we can gain valuable insights into the ongoing narrative and enduring legacy of Muslim political activism in Cambodia.

Based on historical records, Cham Muslims have been involved in government affairs since their arrival in Khmer territory. Several Cham Muslims hold military, political, and civil servant positions at all levels of government, while the majority work as traders, farmers, and fishermen, among other pursuits. The first wave of Cham Muslim arrival in Cambodia occurred around 1471, when Vijaya, the then-capital city of the Kingdom of Champa, was occupied by the Nguyen Dynasty of Vietnam.¹⁶ The Cham moved to new places of hope, such as Melaka, Kelantan, Terengganu, Hainan in South China, Sumatra, and other places.¹⁷ A big cluster of refugees moved to the southwest of the modern territory of Cambodia. Although a series of conquests coloured the relationship between the Champa and Khmer Kingdoms, they two had close ties and controversial relations regarding the family lineage of both royal families. Professor Ken Vansak, an authoritative Khmer historian, once argued that Khmer Kings with the suffix name 'Varman' were of Cham descent through the marriages of Cham men and Khmer women.¹⁸ This points to the period before the Islamisation of the Cham, around the ninth to 11th centuries.¹⁹ These lineage relations between the Cham and Khmer may be helpful in

¹⁶ Musa 2018

¹⁷ Nakamura 2000; Okawa 2014

¹⁸ Osman 2010, 8

¹⁹ Tarling 1992, 158

understanding the construction of the narrative about the harmonisation process between Muslims, majority Cham, and broader Khmer society.

Another interpretation of the interactions between Cham Muslims and Khmer rulers involves the hypothesis of an Islamisation process that occurred within the upper echelons of the Khmer royal hierarchy. This mirrors how Islam underwent nuanced proliferation in the Southeast Asian region or *Nusantara* during that era, when Islamic influence diffused from the upper strata of society to the lower levels.²⁰ However, in the mainland Southeast context, it should be noted that despite having a similar pattern, they communities faced facing very different challenges, with Muslim rule in Cambodia and Champa lasting only a brief period.

The reception of Islam within the Khmer royal family was expected to provide a conducive environment for the comfortable adoption of the faith, fostering a context where non-Muslims can readily embrace Islam without undue difficulty. Kersteen showed the decisive argument for the conversion of one member of the Khmer royal family, Chao Ponea Cand. He ruled under the name Reameathipadei, then adopted the Islamic name Ibrahim after converting to Islam around the 1640s, nearly two centuries after the coming of Cham Muslims to Cambodia. Kersteen noted that “in the wake of the king's conversion, Cambodia's Muslim Malay and Cham communities were able to increase their political influence.”²¹ This portrays the pluralistic nature of Southeast Asian societies and underscores the intricate interconnections that existed among the archipelagic empires during the Age of Commerce. Before the reign of Reameathipadei/Ibrahim in Cambodia, Muslims from Malay, Java, and Cham had mutually depended on the Khmer royal family. Kersten additionally observed that the were prevailing political circumstances which motivated Ibrahim's conversion, including, notably, intermarriage with a Cham woman.²²

²⁰ Ricklefs 2001, 3; Tarling 1992, 330

²¹ Kersten 2006, 1

²² Kersten 2006, 15

Nicholas Weber conducted an extensive study focused on the involvement of Cham Muslims in politics. His research delved into examining personal narratives and non-official royal genealogies dating from the late 18th to 19th centuries. Weber noted that "many Cham was appointed as a court official, governor assistant, lieutenants or chief of the village (*ponhea*), chief of cantons (*mesrok*), representative of the ministry of justice, and several Cham as part of the army."²³ These narratives expose that Cham have long been involved in Cambodian politics and played a significant role in regional politics²⁴. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that in Weber's work, there is a notable absence of an examination of the religious dimension of Islam as a driving force behind the political activism of the Cham.

Nevertheless, primary sources from the late 18th to 19th centuries, three centuries after the Cham had been dispersed to Cambodia, can be reasonably construed as substantiation of the Cham's identification as Muslims during that period. This period is also one or two centuries after what Nakamura argues is "the second wave of Islamisation of Champa" by Malay Muslims in the 16th and 17th centuries.²⁵ Weber's examination of the narrative accounts and royal chronicles also sheds light on the prevailing relationship model between the Cham community and local rulers. His observations and findings underscored that "in 19th century Cambodia, Cham political action and influence [was] made possible by the patron-client system."²⁶

The patron-client system, or clientelism, is underpinned by political pragmatism. In the Khmer Kingdom, patronage was not given solely to Muslims because of their shared belief in Islam, addressing the conversion of one Khmer King, but was instead driven by the pursuit of mutual benefits stemming from connections that had been established for

²³ Weber refer to the primary sources collected in Ecole Francaise d'xtreme-Orient (Paris). These were relevant primary texts. Weber 2015, 5

²⁴ Weber 2015, 5

²⁵ Nakamura 2000, 62

²⁶ Weber 2015, 5

decades. In the annals of Cambodian socio-political history, Muslims assumed the role of clients within the Khmer royal family's patronage structure in exchange for unwavering obedience and the provision of various services. This association is not one extended gratuitously but is characterised by mutual benefit. The Cham community, notably, not only operated as clients within the Khmer royal family, but also within the elite and among high-ranking officials. This positioning granted the Cham the privilege of protection and afforded them access to prominent positions within the Cambodian socio-political milieu. The patron-client system emerges as the conventional framework for elucidating the structural dynamics underpinning the relationship between Muslims and local authorities in Indochinese society. Within this framework, Muslims benefit from the patronage of influential rulers, who sometimes elevate Muslims to esteemed positions endowed with policymaking authority. Additionally, even the Muslim scholars luxuriated by the patronage, this manifested as the catalyst that allowed them to produce intellectual masterpieces.²⁷ In another instance, particularly regarding the Cambodian Cham context, the patronage by the local rulers allowed the Cham to freely express their Islamic tradition among the Buddhist tradition.²⁸

Following the conclusion of the French protectorate era in Indochina, Cambodia encountered significant political challenges arising from the global geopolitical landscape. In 1953, King Norodom Sihanouk declared Cambodia an independent kingdom. King Sihanouk's aspirations were rooted in the restoration of Cambodia's historical greatness and traditions while simultaneously endeavouring to curtail the influence exerted by China and Vietnam across various facets of Cambodian society, including culture, lifestyle, and the socio-political sphere. To realise this vision, King Sihanouk implemented a policy called 'Khmerisation', which represented a comprehensive cultural and political initiative to foster a sense of unity among Cambodia's diverse populace, encompassing

²⁷ Azra 2004, 59, 77, 79, 80

²⁸ Osman 2010

individuals from various racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. The ultimate goal of Khmerisation was to encourage the adoption of a more distinctly Khmer identity, thereby forging a cohesive national identity that transcended the boundaries of disparate groups.

Non-Khmer origin people were categorised by King Sihanouk into three groups: Khmer-Loeu, people from minority groups living in the highlands and mostly living to the northeast of Phnom Penh, in the provinces of Stung Treng, Ratanakiri, and Mondulhiri;²⁹ Khmer-Krom, living in the lowland area around Mekong Delta; and Khmer-Islam, including Sunni/mainstream Muslims following the Southeast Asian Islamic teaching tradition; and Cvea-Islam, a group of Sunni Muslims who originated from the Malay world.³⁰ The Imam San Group or *Cham Jaheed*, who follows Islamic teachings from Imam San and shares the religious tradition with the Cham Bani people from Central Vietnam. Under the reign of King Sihanouk, a noteworthy development was the deliberate inclusion of Muslims in various government positions. This strategic endeavor was intricately linked to Sihanouk's overarching political agenda, which prominently featured the Khmerisation project. As an integral component of this initiative, King Sihanouk sought to facilitate a more thorough integration of Muslims into Cambodian society, with the overarching objective of nurturing a shared sense of homogeneity and fostering national unity.

***Ummah* as a Tool for Political Bargaining: Finding New Patrons**

Following a challenging period in the state-religion relations of Cambodia, specifically the Khmer Rouge period (1975-79),³¹ Cambodian Muslims found support and patronage within the global *ummah* (Muslim community). This connection served as a pathway for Muslim political activism in Cambodia. It highlights the reconnection and strengthening of

²⁹ Maunati 2013, 77

³⁰ Maunati and Sari 2014

³¹ See more detail in; Osman 2002, 2006, 113; So 2011

ties between Cambodian Muslims and global Islam in the post-conflict period, signifying a pivotal moment in the evolution of Muslim political engagement in the country. Cambodian Muslims and global Islam are intertwined in three ways:³² through the *Hajj*, Cambodian Muslims travel to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and interact with Muslims from other countries; through education, Cambodian Muslims send their children to study abroad, such as in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Middle Eastern countries, and several Muslim leaders in Cambodia were educated at universities abroad, particularly in Malaysia and the Middle East; and through the diaspora, as Cambodian Muslims tried to escape from the Khmer Rouge regime to safe countries overseas. Ahmad Yahya, a prominent Cambodian Muslim figure who held a leadership role within the opposition party and headed an Islamic NGO, is noteworthy for his background as a former refugee who sought refuge in France and spent time in exile in the United States (US).

It is essential to highlight that the rise of Muslim figures in Cambodian politics is not solely attributable to internal dynamics within the Cambodian Muslim community. The influence and encouragement stemming from the broader global Muslim world is equally significant, as Taouti shows in his experience visiting Cambodia after the conflict and bringing fresh money from the Islamic Development Bank (IDB).³³ In this section, I expound on the significance of the nexus between Cambodian Muslims and the global Islamic world, illustrating how it has evolved into a valuable political asset and a source of political leverage for Cambodian Muslims' active participation in the country's political landscape.

I posit that this phenomenon can be attributed to three key reasons. The first rationale focuses on the substantial financial aid and lucrative investment opportunities brought by global Islamic entities. This influx of resources has played a pivotal role in aiding Cambodia's recovery from the tumultuous aftermath of political instability. Taouti's account paints a vivid

³² Farouk 2008, 77

³³ Taouti 1982

picture of the immediate aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime. He highlights the stark reality that prevailed, characterised by the complete devastation of the Islamic infrastructure and the tragic loss of nearly all *Ustad* (educated individuals in Islam). Significantly, Taouti stands as one of the early pioneers who facilitated the connection between the Cambodian Muslim community and the global ummah, with a specific emphasis on their linkage to the IDB in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.³⁴ This endeavour bore fruit in substantial financial aid, amounting to one million US dollars, provided by the IDB. This funding played a pivotal role in assisting the Muslim community in the arduous task of reconstructing the religious infrastructure that had been decimated during this tumultuous period.³⁵ Since its inauguration in 2014, a splendid new mosque has graced Phnom Penh, known as the Al-Serkal Mosque. This architectural marvel stands as a testament to the generosity of the Al-Serkal family from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who commissioned its construction. The Al-Serkal Mosque serves as a profound symbol, signifying the increasing prevalence and acceptance of Islam within the officially Buddhist country. It not only stands as a place of worship but serves as a physical embodiment of the growing Islamic presence in Cambodia.

The second pivotal factor involves the organised efforts of Cambodian Muslims to harness global development aid, channeled through a structured and systematic movement. A key player in this endeavour are Islamic social organisations, which serve as a means for the Cambodian Muslim community to coordinate and direct global aid effectively towards the betterment of their community.³⁶ The post-conflict landscape in Cambodia drew significant global attention to this Buddhist nation, not only from the broader international community but also from the Muslim world. The country's Islamic religious community had been one

³⁴ Taouti 1982

³⁵ USD 800.000 was allocated for reconstruction of the Mosques and Islamic School, and the rest USD 200.000 for providing the Islamic school material, such as: Islamic book in Malaysi and Arabic. Taouti 1982, 7

³⁶ Farouk 2008, 77

of the primary targets of the destructive policies implemented by the communist regime during the Khmer Rouge period.³⁷ In the aftermath, there was a notable emergence of Cambodian Muslim-led NGOs, who played a crucial role in addressing various societal and community needs within the Cambodian Muslim community and contributed to the broader process of post-conflict recovery and development. Muslim figures who had received education in foreign countries, spanning the Middle East, Europe, and the US, were instrumental in establishing these Islamic social organisations. Their primary aim was to secure foreign assistance to support programs within Cambodia, with particular emphasis on education, *dakwah* (proselytisation), and the development of religious infrastructure, as well as the provision of financial aid, including cash disbursements and essential groceries, to address basic needs within the community.³⁸ Development assistance from the Government of Malaysia was a notable source within the government-based category, channeled through the Malaysian Embassy in Phnom Penh and predominantly serving to facilitate educational opportunities for Cambodian Muslims.³⁹ Furthermore, the Malaysian government extended its support through grants to bolster the Islamic Institute at the Boeng Kak Mosque (now the Al-Serkal Mosque) in Phnom Penh. Additionally, Malaysia plays a role in aiding and reinforcing the Women's Center and clinic located at Kilometer 7, Phnom Penh.⁴⁰ Middle Eastern countries – notably Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – have also played a major role in providing development assistance to Cambodia. Middle Eastern assistance is typically facilitated through Muslim NGOs operating within Cambodia, reflecting the broader commitment of these nations to support

³⁷ Elfrianto, Sultan, and Bahfiarti 2022; Osman 2002

³⁸ Bruckmayr 2015, 339–40

³⁹ Sari 2013, 218

⁴⁰ The region with the sizeable Muslim or also known the Muslim Village. it is located in the highway road to the north in Battambang in the border of Cambodia and Thailand.

developmental initiatives and community-focused projects across the Muslim world.⁴¹

The third influential factor in this context is the role of global aid in cultivating local Muslim figures who emerge as prominent grassroots leaders. These individuals are often seen as local heroes, actively engaging in political and social endeavours. Distinguishing between their political motives and charitable social efforts can be challenging, as many of these Muslim politicians in Cambodia have their roots and continue to be active participants in Islamic civil society initiatives. Their multifaceted engagement spans political and social spheres, underscoring the intricate interplay between political involvement and community-oriented service within the Cambodian Muslim context.⁴² Social events like the inauguration of mosques, the establishment of Islamic schools, and the distribution of Islamic literature or essential provisions for Muslims undoubtedly hold significance within the Cambodian Muslim community. However, it is noteworthy that it is often the assistance received from Muslim nations or individual support from abroad that thrusts specific Cambodian Muslims into the limelight, elevating them to the status of heroes within the grassroots community. These individuals are recognised for their instrumental roles in securing and facilitating external aid, which has a tangible and transformative impact for the local Muslim community. These prominent roles in securing external aid also bestow advantages upon these individuals that can create opportunities for them in electoral politics. Their standing as community heroes and their demonstrated ability to procure resources for the community can translate into electoral appeal, which, in turn, can propel them into political office.

In a liberal democracy, the allocation of power is determined by the outcome of a majority vote. The motivations behind voter preferences in electoral politics can be multifaceted, encompassing factors such as kinship, religiosity, individual charisma, and pragmatic considerations. In

⁴¹ Sari 2013, 218

⁴² Farouk 2008, 78

the context of Cambodian electoral politics, particularly within the Muslim community, individual charisma and pragmatic reasoning often play pivotal roles in shaping the preferences of Muslim voters. The development of individual charisma is intricately linked to the workings of political pragmatism. Within this framework, global aid flow serves as a conduit for numerous Cambodian Muslims, particularly those who lead Islamic social organisations that function as intermediaries, bridging external charity and the grassroots Muslim community in the country. Consequently, individuals who are at the forefront of these efforts tend to capture the spotlight. This political phenomenon can be readily discerned.

Khmer-Islam and the Dominant Party: The Continued Patron-Client Relationship

It is interesting to note that some Muslim figures in Cambodia vehemently assert that Muslims are not actively engaged in political activities and contend that Islam is not closely associated with politics in the country. They emphasise that this detachment from politics significantly contributes to the peaceful coexistence of Muslims within the Buddhist-monarchist state.⁴³ This perspective underscores the belief that a degree of political neutrality has been instrumental in fostering harmonious relations between religious communities in the country. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that several Muslim leaders have been deeply involved in high-ranking positions within the ruling political party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Hence, it can be argued that Muslims, rather than shying away from the political domain, have actively engaged in political activism by aligning themselves with and supporting the ruling party. In this section, I will delve into three distinct phenomena that illustrate why and how Muslims in Cambodia participate

⁴³ Field work, Phnom Penh, October-September 2017

in political activism and how the engagement of Muslims in politics develops Islam as a religious institution and Muslims as a minority group.⁴⁴

However, prior to addressing Muslim engagement in Cambodian politics, it is essential to discuss the Cambodian political environment itself, which is slightly different compared to that of Southeast Asian countries' political environments where minority Muslims engage in politics, such as Thailand and the Philippines, where Muslims' participation is driven by contested religious identities and ideological issues.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Muslim politics in Singapore may share some similarities with Cambodia, grappling with a semi-authoritarian regime.⁴⁶ Cambodia is considered a semi-authoritarian country that practices illiberal democracy, with power consolidated under the authority of Hun Sen with recently further by his son, Hun Manet, and the CPP.⁴⁷ While Muslims are numerically insignificant, they are significantly involved in political activities and engage with the political structure. Most support the CPP and have pledged loyalty to the ruling power.⁴⁸ Moreover, the highest Islamic institution has an official hierarchical command line under the Kingdom, with the Mufti having proclaimed himself as a CPP cadre.⁴⁹

The involvement of Muslims in Cambodian politics and the burgeoning of grassroots Muslim activism has become increasingly evident in recent political events. Notably, there is a discernible trend of substantial support for the ruling CPP. The relationship between the Muslim community and the CPP is undeniably tied closely. Hun Sen, the former Prime Minister, which further was succeeded by his son the recent prime minister, both representing the CPP enjoys the complete trust of the Muslim community. Massively, the Muslim community supported the CPP

⁴⁴ The development of Islam in Cambodia is indicated by two aspects: the first is how the freedom to practice religious obligation and the availability of the religious facility; the second is how the quality of Muslim life increases in economic matters.

⁴⁵ Goodman 2023; Sattar and Sahoh 2022; Suaedy 2012

⁴⁶ Abdullah 2018

⁴⁷ Loughlin et al. 2021; McCarthy and Un 2017; Norén-Nilsson 2021; Un 2011, 2019

⁴⁸ Goodman 2023; Hasram 2020

⁴⁹ Bakti 2009; Osman 2010

through various grassroots activism. Muslim youth and women's groups also show their deep engagement with CPP campaign programs. Without a doubt, this is a reciprocal relationship, where Muslims show their commitment to the party due to the party's massive support for the Muslim community. For instance, the responsibility for the distribution of gift packages to Muslim families and assistance in providing funds and electricity for mosques and musholla are often held by representatives of the CPP, such as Dr Sos Mousine, Cambodian Muslim Leaders and Members of the Central Committee of the CPP, now served as a Member of Parliament of Cambodia. Furthermore, the commitment of the CPP's highest rank to the Muslim community is obviously noticed and impactful for Muslims.⁵⁰ Before the 2023 Cambodian election, for instance, Hun Manet, the CCP candidate and now Prime Minister, had several times joined Muslim events, such as the inauguration of new mosques in Kampong Chhnang and Takeo Province, where hundreds of Muslim joined to celebrate.⁵¹

However, it is also important to note that the presence of Muslim politicians in Cambodia is not limited to the CPP; they are also active within opposition parties. This diversity has given rise to a discourse regarding the political stance of Muslims in the country. Some Muslim politicians, particularly those aligned with the opposition, have criticised other Muslims, particularly those in the Mufti's circle, arguing that Muslim leaders should maintain a neutral position when it comes to politics.

One prominent Muslim politician from the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCIPPEC, founded by King Sihanouk) and former member of the National Assembly, Sabu Bacha, had criticised the close Muslim-CPP relationship. Bacha has suggested that the Mufti, who holds a respected and elevated position, should remain politically neutral. He contends that if the Mufti aligns with one political party, it diminishes his stature below

⁵⁰ Facebook Post of Cambodian People's Party 2023

⁵¹ Facebook Post H.E. Oknha Datuk Othman Hassan 2023

that of the party, a position that should command respect among Cambodian Muslims. Additionally, Bacha emphasises that such alignment is not conducive to an open democracy and civil society.⁵² The reality is that most of those who hold positions of religious hierarchy, from the provincial *imam* to the village *imam*, are associated with the CPP.

It is evident that Muslim political activism in Cambodia, which has a historical foundation extending over centuries, has been notably influenced by and, at times, proliferated through political patronage. Sabu Bacha's criticism of the Muslim-CPP relationship can be seen as a critique of this established Muslim political tradition. It underscores that there is no universally accepted blueprint for Muslim political engagement; the suitability of a particular approach to Muslim politics remains debatable. However, the Mufti's perspective, as conveyed in his justification for the relationship between his role as the highest Islamic authority and the CPP, the ruling party that exhibits characteristics akin to a single-party system, offers valuable insights into the dynamics at play within Cambodian Muslim politics. The Mufti stated, "I have been part of the CPP since its inception. Thanks to God, the CPP has become the ruling party and has the majority. As a minority, Muslims need the support of the majority. Members of the minority can always come to me for help, and I can ask for the government's help."⁵³

The engagement of Muslims in Cambodian formal politics can be traced back to the Sihanouk and Lon Nol periods. Math Ly was a major **Muslim figure in CPP from 1979. He was a former member of the People's Assembly of Democratic Kampuchea and was a former Permanent member of the Khmer Rouge Tboung Khmum District Committee.** However, the pivotal moment in grassroots Muslim engagement in politics began in the 1993 general elections, which marked the advent of a new phase in Cambodia's political landscape following the collapse of the radical communist regime. Notably, the Muslim majority played a

⁵² Bakti n.d.) Unpublished Paper

⁵³ Bakti 2009, 7

significant role by casting their votes in favor of the CPP. Subsequently, several Muslim figures who had cultivated close ties with the CPP were appointed to political positions within the government. These positions included Secretary of State and Deputy Secretary, underscoring Muslims' growing influence and involvement in the country's political arena. Additionally, there is a noteworthy presence of Muslim representatives within the National Assembly of Cambodia. While most of these seats are held by members of the CPP, a few are affiliated with FUNCINPEC.

The responsibility of these Muslim leaders is not limited to matters pertaining to religion but increasingly towards a variety of government affairs, extending their influence across multiple ministries. Their engagement is driven not solely by a desire for survival but also by a commitment to enhance the quality of life for the Muslim population, particularly in education and socioeconomic wellbeing. This multifaceted involvement reflects their dedication to contributing to improving their community and the nation. In his speech at the International Conference held by the World Muslim Communities Council in Abu Dhabi, UAE, Othman Hassan, as senior minister in charge of the Special Mission, presented notes concerning the Muslim community in Cambodia and its contribution to the development of the country: (1) Muslims can freely practice their religion, wear clothing mandated by religion, and build religious facilities and infrastructure freely; (2) Muslims have enjoyed democratic rights to vote and can be elected to political offices, such as being members of a national assembly. He asserted: "The Royal Government has allowed representatives from Islamic communities to become leaders in institutions, including the Senate, the National Assembly, and ministries, and hold senior positions such as secretaries and deputy secretaries of state, senior diplomats, national and sub-national authorities, as well as become officers in the armed forces." (3) The Government shall recruit 1,500 permanent teachers and 180 contract

teachers under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.⁵⁴

The second significant factor contributing to the increasing influence of Muslims in Cambodian politics is the presence and role of Islamic institutions, specifically the Mufti of Cambodia and the Cambodian Halal Body, namely The Commission for Examination of Halal Products in Cambodia (CEHP). These institutions operate officially within the framework of the Cambodian monarchy and government.⁵⁵ The Mufti's institution, currently known as the Highest Islamic Council of Religious Affairs of Cambodia (HICIRAC), has a historical connection with the government dating back to the French Protectorate era (1863-1953). This institutional linkage has persisted over the years. It became stronger when King Sihanouk implemented reforms to the structure of the Mufti institution in 2000, positioning the Mufti directly under the purview of the Cambodian monarchy. This reform not only strengthened Mufti's role but also brought Islamic institutions closer to the centers of political power.⁵⁶

Another significant institution contributing to the evolving landscape of Muslim influence in Cambodia is the CEHP. It is noteworthy that Cambodia's approach to halal certification differs from that of neighboring countries, where such institutions often operate under semi-state Islamic bodies, as seen by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (*Jabatan Kebajikan Agama Islam Malaysia*, JAKIM) in Malaysia, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (*Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura*, MUIS) in Singapore, and the Indonesian Ulama Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) in Indonesia. In Cambodia, the CEHP, that responsible for *halal* affairs operates under the umbrella of the General Department of Consumer Protection, Competition, and Fraud Repression within the Ministry of Commerce. This department is responsible for overseeing five

⁵⁴ The remarks delivered by Othman Hassan also have been explained by my research subject in field research; Cambodia's harmonisation role highlighted at World Muslim Meet 2022

⁵⁵ Hasram 2020, 137

⁵⁶ There is different perspective on the appointment of Haji Sulyeman and Kamaruddin bin Yusof regarding the timeline. Bakti n.d.; Farouk 2008, 77

sub-departments related to various aspects of consumer protection and competition. The establishment of this body was formalised through Sub-Decree No. 38 ANKr. BK, was officially enacted on March 16, 2020, signifying Cambodia's commitment to regulating and certifying halal products in a unique manner within the Southeast Asian context.⁵⁷

The third influential factor contributing to the growing presence of Muslims in Cambodian politics is the implementation of affirmative action policies aimed at facilitating their participation in official government positions. The government has been increasingly proactive in providing for the role of Muslims in government and endorsing their political activism. Then-Prime Minister Hun Sen issued a statement that signifies the government's commitment to providing opportunities for Muslims to hold top positions at the sub-national level, particularly in provinces and districts with significant Muslim populations.⁵⁸ Hun Sen reiterated this commitment during the closing ceremony of the annual meeting of the Ministry of Interior in 2022. He emphasised the importance of appointing Muslim deputy governors in districts with Muslim populations. This strategic move aims to facilitate effective communication regarding policies and initiatives that concern Muslims in these communities, contributing to the broader goal of religious harmonisation within the country.⁵⁹

It is essential to clarify that the provision for affirmative action for Muslims in official government positions is not intended as a strict quota system but rather as a policy designed to ensure that qualified individuals from the Muslim community have leadership opportunities. Similar to affirmative action policies for women, candidates must meet specific

⁵⁷ More detail in official website: <https://www.ccf dg.gov.kh/en/commission-committee/new-title-3/>

⁵⁸ Vanyuth 2022

⁵⁹ Hun Sen stated that "those districts that have Muslims living in the should have Muslim as their deputy governor in that district. With this, we can easily communicate on the policy works related to Muslims in the communities, which is part of religious harmonization in the country" Kunthear 2022

qualifications to be considered for these positions. Following Hun Sen's remarks, there have been multiple notable appointments of Muslim figures to deputy governor positions in various districts and provinces, including Yusuf Suleiman (*Imam* of Sihanouk Province) as the deputy governor of Sihanouk Province; Tin Sarawuth (Head of Islamic Religious Movement in Battambang) in Battambang Province; Ahmad Sater in Chbar Ampov District; Run Sari (Head of Islamic Movement in Pursat) in Pursat Province; Than Asima, a female Muslim, in Takhmao city; Las Sles in Koh Thom District; Smean Finn in Phnha District; Sen Suphai in Saang district; and Imran Hasssan in Phnom Penh City.⁶⁰ This development is a sign of significant progress in Muslim involvement in official governmental positions. However, these are still new appointments, so it is unclear what their impact will be.

Furthermore, the issuance of various pro-Muslim policies in Cambodia has marked a significant development in recent years. These policies encompass a range of areas, including a regulation granting freedom to wear hijab, the formalisation of halal certification, and the provision of allowances for *madrasa* teachers.⁶¹ These policies were born through lengthy negotiations and were influenced by internal and external factors. External factors can be traced through the connectedness of Muslims in Cambodia with Muslims in the Middle East, which positively impacts development, particularly development within Cambodia's Muslim community.⁶² At the same time, an internal factor which played a crucial role was the emergence of influential Muslim figures who founded Islamic social organisations to help the community. Additionally, their desire to become involved in the ruling party opens up Muslim access to work in a range of sectors in Cambodia.

⁶⁰ The detail information includes the official letter of appointment was post in the Facebook by Cambodian Muslim Media Center. <https://www.facebook.com/cammcenter>

⁶¹ Hasram 2022

⁶² Hasram 2020, 137

Conclusion

A patron-client relationship has long been maintained between Muslims and rulers in Cambodia. Their political relationship has a legacy which can be traced back to the early arrival of Cham Muslims as migrants from the Kingdom of Champa (present day Central Vietnam). There were three main relationship patterns. First, the patron-client relationship between Cham and Khmer royal families. The Khmer elite provided patronage for the Muslims, guaranteed protection, and designated the Cham to official positions in government. At the same time, the Cham offer loyalty to the royal families with outstanding military and martial arts skills. The second is the relation as fellow believers, which refers to the conversion of one Khmer King around the 1640s, Reameathipadei/Ibrahim, who took action to bring Islam into the government. The third is kinship relations, which examines the Khmer-Cham royal families' intermarriage, although there are disagreements about blood lineage between both families. Some historical evidence notes that the intermarriage between the Khmer and Cham is one plausible reason for Muslim engagement in politics.

Global political change and democracy arose as the dominant system in the post-cold war period around the world. I also argue that Cambodian Muslims have found and were found by new patrons: the global *ummah*. This connection to the global Muslim world has become a political bargaining tool, a political muscle that is playing a significant role in Cambodia. There are three key reasons for this: the global aid from the Muslim world brings profitable investment to Cambodia during the time of reconstruction after the end of the Khmer Rouge period; the connection to global Islam forces Cambodian Muslims to organise and develop themselves to secure international aid to the community; and international support creates local Muslim heroes that shine in grassroots communities as those who bring improved welfare. Indeed, we can propose that the connection to global Islam serves as a catalyst for both political pragmatism and political maturity within the Cambodian Muslim community. On the one hand, this connection encourages Muslims to

adopt pragmatic political strategies, leveraging their international ties to benefit their community. On the other hand, it fosters political maturity as they navigate the complex dynamics of domestic and international politics.

The phenomenon of Muslim political activism in Cambodia is notably characterised by its alignment with a centralised power, predominantly supporting the CPP. A sense of political pragmatism drives this alignment, as it offers a strategic advantage in navigating the complexities of electoral politics. This pattern of political alignment underscores the enduring and growing influence of political patronage, which plays a pivotal role in shaping the relationship between Muslims and the Cambodian government in contemporary politics.

In conclusion, Muslim political activism in Cambodia is intricately linked to the legacy of political patronage, a historical tradition within Cambodian Muslim politics. Moreover, this pattern of political alignment with the CPP has been further reinforced by the substantial political leverage gained through connections to the global Islamic world, which has emerged as a new and influential patron. It is essential to recognise that this political affiliation with the ruling party, the CPP, has significant implications for the stability and role of Muslims within the broader Cambodian political landscape.

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