'Trying to find a way out of the cage'

Youths' civil society expressions in 2018 post-election Cambodia

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Abstract

After the 2018 elections, political rights are scarce in Cambodia, new laws are enacted that tighten state control, and critics are under constant fear of crackdown. Youth, especially, have due to their mobility, size and strength gained increasing attention from the government, attempting to de-politicise youth activities and groups. This thesis examines young civil society actors' possibilities to participate, thus answering the questions; How do civil society actors adapt their strategies of participation? What *modes of participation* (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007) are accessible, meaning how does the government organize and manage *conflict*? What do (un)available modes of participation tell us about the regime? The analysis builds on empirical data collected while on fieldwork in Cambodia and comprises 16 semi-structured interviews with youth actors. The analysis arrives at the following result; the government organizes the access to political resources in a way that effectively excludes critics from modes of participation that allow for contestation. This results in actors searching for new modes of participation, exiting what is commonly understood of as 'civil society' while continuing to identify as belonging to this sphere. Thus, this thesis provides a reconceptualization of 'civil society' capable of encompassing Cambodian youths' struggle for access.

Keywords: Civil society, Youth, Participation, Cambodia, 2018 elections, Hun Sen, Modes of participation, Activism, NGOs

Acknowledgement

When arriving in Cambodia, some of my interviewees mentioned to me that there are tendencies of self-censorship in civil society. They said that some actors and organizations tend to silence themselves and set boundaries for their own participation as a result of the deteriorating political crackdown on dissidents. After only a couple of weeks in the country, I noticed these tendencies in myself, constantly reviewing my own behavior in relation to the surroundings, wondering about the hotel managers' kind but reoccurring inquiries about where I was heading, or about the man in the coffee shop who continuously looked our way. The political oppression is, while in many ways blunt and forceful, often very subtle, successfully infiltrating the society even beyond the governments' actual reach. When leaving Phnom Penh, I couldn't help but releasing a slight sigh of relief about my research not having caused my interviewees or myself any harm. However, for my interviewees, the insecurity I experienced is an everyday reality. I want to thank all of them dearly for having the courage to meet with me and share their experiences, fears and hopes. Their optimism, strength and perseverance through the challenges they face is truly admiring.

Thanks to Anders for his insightful comments that helped me find the right path for this research and stay focused throughout the process. Thanks to Astrid and my gatekeeper for all their help with initiating contact and preparing me for the field with their seemingly endless knowledge about the country. Finally, thanks to Gustav for his ever so empathetic encouragement.

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Acronyms

CBO	Community-based organization
CNRP	Cambodia National Rescue Party – the main opposition party that was dissolved by Cambodia's Supreme Court in November 2017
CPP	Cambodian People's Party – the ruling party in Cambodia with party president Hun Sen holding the position of Prime Minister since 1985
INGO	International non-governmental organization
KPRK	Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party – sole ruling party in Cambodia since 1979 and renamed Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in 1991
KR	Khmer Rouge – led by Pol Pot between 1975-1979, causing the death of 25 per cent of the Cambodian population
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PPA	Paris Peace Accords – UN initiated signed agreement on the settlement of the conflict in Cambodia in 1991 that ended the civil war
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea – founded in 1979 after the overthrow of Democratic Kampuchea and the Khmer Rouge
UNTAC	UN Transitional Authority for Cambodia – UN peacekeeping mission in 1992-1993 following the PPA during which the UN organized the first elections in Cambodia

1. INTRODUCTION

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has been in power for the past 33 years and has in the recent 2018 elections managed to secure another victory for his Cambodian People's Party (CPP). In 2013, the main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), was close to causing an upset in the elections by building their campaign on youth volunteers ready to claim their rights and demand "Change! Change! Change!" (McCargo, 2014; Norén-Nilsson, 2017b; Soeung, 2016). Despite the close election victory for the incumbent CPP, scholars predicted a bright future for the country's democratic development lead by a new enthusiastic and critical generation of powerful youth. Nonetheless, the CPP seeing its monopoly on power threatened, took measures to nip this glimpse of hope in the bud. The CNRP was dissolved, opposition leaders such as Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha were exiled or imprisoned, public services are threatened to be withheld for those who do not comply, press and media have been bought, and new laws and regulations have been introduced that violate constitutional freedoms of speech and assembly (Croissant, 2018). Certainly, these measures disempowered, and suppressed the movement for change that started to take shape in Cambodian civil society and protest, public gathering and even utterances of critique come with a high price. Therefore, this thesis aims to make sense of the ways that this active, critical mass of youth is adapting their engagement to these new and increasingly suppressive conditions and the diminishing space to manoeuvre that comes with it.

Thus, this research concerns itself with the *modes of participation* (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007) that are (in)accessible to Cambodian civil society actors in the post-2018 election era and what that can tell us about the current political regime. This thesis rejects the common attempts to evaluate the quality of the Cambodian regime and label it a failed democracy. Instead, this research aims to acknowledge modes of participation that commonly are dismissed as "mere artefacts of dysfunctional democratic institutions (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:779)" in order to paint a more accurate picture of the struggle for access that is taking place in Cambodia today. Therefore, by interviewing and observing civil society actors, this research will focus on the modes of participation that in fact are accessible to Cambodian citizens, how civil society actors occupy these modes and what that tells us about the post-election regime. Thus, answering the following research questions;

◊ How do civil society actors adapt their strategies of participation to what is now considered a one-party state?

◊ What *modes of participation* are accessible to (collective and individual) civil society actors, meaning how does the government organize and manage *conflict*?

◊ What does the availability or lack of *modes of participation* tell us about the 2018 post-election regime?

What follows is the thesis' purpose statement, followed by the demarcation that helps narrow down the research. Thereafter, the disposition of the thesis provides the reader with a red thread throughout the thesis.

1.1   Purpose statement

In existing literature, the conceptualization that is commonly embraced for analysing and making sense of civil society is commonly limited to engagement that occurs autonomously from the state, that is collective and formal (Alagappa, 2004; Coventry, 2016; Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007; Waibel, 2014). This thesis argues that this conceptualization of civil society is too narrow and insufficient in encompassing the diverse forms that civic engagement can take in Cambodia. In order to make sense of Cambodian civil society and the ways in which citizens and groups carve out new modes of participation in reaction to an increasingly oppressive political structure, this thesis suggests an urgency for a redefinition of the concept. Thus, it is argued that the sphere of civil society must incorporate collective as well as individual, formal as well as informal, and state-autonomous as well as state-sponsored modes of participation. This wider and inclusive re-conceptualization answers to patterns in the empirical data and interviewees' urge to be considered part of civil society independently of their current modes of participation. Thus, the conceptualization that this thesis argues for facilitates a more accurate and holistic view of civic engagement and the struggle for access to political resources in post-election Cambodia. In addition, this thesis contributes with a novel empirical insight into the 2018 post-election era and the dynamics that hinder and enable political participation. By focusing on the demographic of 'youth', the thesis provides a rare empirical insight into what in existing literature often is considered a generation that gives reason for optimism in times of diminishing access to political resources. Thus, by focusing on this demographic, we shed light on possible future developments in Cambodian civil society and the ways in which today's youth views their opportunities to engage. What follows now is the thesis' demarcation.

1.2   Demarcation

As is mentioned above, this thesis focuses on the demographic of Cambodian 'youth', involving interviewees between the ages of 28 and 38. It does not aim to make general statements about

civil society that goes beyond that demographic, but rather, aims to make sense of the ways in which the Cambodian 'youth' attempts to adapt to the narrowing space that is made available to them after the recent elections. Interviewees were asked about their experiences with their participation in civil society before during and after the elections, focusing on the modes of participation that were occupied, new modes that were relocated to or carved out and modes that were abandoned. Thus, when it comes to the thesis' timeframe, focus is given to the post-election era, however, including a comparative aspect to their perception of the space that they operate in now and prior to the elections. Also, this thesis does not claim to offer a complete sketch of all existing modes of participation in Cambodian civil society. Instead, it focuses on the modes of participation that the thesis' interviewees chose to discuss and highlight. Moreover, on initial planning, the idea was to include members of the leading party's (CPP) youth representatives, but this proved difficult and somewhat precarious, including risks for me as a researcher in the field, and was therefore dismissed. Members of what by my interviewees were considered a movement of government-co-opted youths are not included in the thesis either. This is due to the practical difficulties of tracing participants in government-organized events. In the next section, the chapters that this thesis consists of are outlined.

1.3   Disposition

This thesis is structured as follows; After this introductory chapter follows chapter (2), in which background to the Cambodian politics and civic engagement is given by critically reviewing existing literature. Chapter (3) provides an overview of the theoretical approach that is chosen for this research as well as the operationalization of Jayasuriya and Rodan's *modes of participation* in this thesis. Thereafter, the method is introduced in chapter (4), containing information about ontological and epistemological positioning, the chosen method of discourse analysis, sampling and data collection, and ethical considerations and reflexivity. Chapter (5) presents the research findings. The analysis consists of five sections, the first being a discussion of the meaning of 'civil society' for the thesis' interviewees in order to provide an understanding of the field they position themselves in. The four subsequent sections follow a model inspired by Jayasuriya and Rodan's matrix. Lastly, the conclusion rounds off the research in chapter (6).

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter serves as background to the topic as well as to the existing literature in the field. Thus, this chapter critically engages with scholars of Cambodian political development and civil society, in order to provide a context for this research to position itself in. The literature review is divided into two sections; Firstly, existing literature on the Cambodian political system and its democratisation process is reviewed. Secondly, literature that discusses Cambodian civil society is critically examined. Thereafter, a gap is identified in order to position this thesis within this existing collection of knowledge about Cambodian politics and civic engagement.

2.1   Cambodia's rocky road to democracy

This section will start out with providing an overview of the vast cluster of literature that in different ways tries to make sense of Cambodian 'democratization'. The background to the history of elections in Cambodia is laid out. This provides the reader with important insight into the changing dynamics of Cambodian politics and the power relations that in different ways define the spaces within which civil society actors can manoeuvre. In addition, the different approaches to analysing Cambodian 'democratization' are reviewed. In what follows, we will see that existing literature often attempts to label and define the Cambodian regime, attempts to evaluate the quality of Cambodian 'democracy' in terms of a linear assumption of democratic development, as well as attempts to re-interpret the Western notion of democracy within the Cambodian context.

Cambodian history is described as "one of absolute tragedy (Morgenbesser, 2017:47)", with independence from colonial rule being overshadowed by the genocide of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge (KR), invasions, and civil war. In 1985, former KR commander Hun Sen was named Head of State of what had become the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), a position that he would keep an iron grip and eventually become one of the longest-ruling world leaders (Soeung, 2016). With the crumbling of the Iron Curtain and thereby the Soviet aid to Vietnam, Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia, which caused concern over a possible return of the KR (Baaz & Lilja, 2014). In 1991, this led the United Nations to interfere by introducing democratic institutions in Cambodia, with the first elections held in 1993. The UN initiated the Paris Peace Accords (PPA) as well as established the UN Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC), referred to by scholars as "UN-implemented democracy" (Baaz & Lilja, 2014), a "big-bang approach to democratization" (Öjendal & Lilja, 2009), or an imposition from the

West (Sullivan, 2016; Un, 2011). Cambodia was then and now considered to fall short of the preconditions needed to successfully introduce democracy; meaning displaying low income levels, low traditions of participation, education, and improper class dispositions (Öjendal & Lilja, 2009). It is also argued that the liberal democratic discourse and values were insufficiently introduced to the Cambodian people, leading to poor adaptation and lingering traditional values of a "winner-takes-all political culture based on endemic distrust" (Chandler, 1998: 43), creating a separate, hybrid discourse (Lilja, 2010). It is also often considered problematic that democratization in Cambodia was neither a gradual development nor a sudden reaction to a collapse or shock dictated by a vibrant civil society, but rather, democracy was unnaturally imposed (Un, 2011). The introduction of liberal values, human rights and rule of law is for better or worse further associated with the opening of Cambodia to international aid and foreign donors. Michael Sullivan (2016) is one of the scholars arguing that Western interference in the name of democracy actually served the ambition of opening Cambodia for foreign investment and trade. Establishing an electoral system that at least gave the appearance of democratic contestation was not the beginning of a long-term political development project but rather, an issue of access. The system was simply set up with the ambition of being credible enough to justify engagement, he argues. In the years that followed, the violence, killings and suppression that accompanied campaigns and elections did not lead to concrete measures such as sanctions against the regime. Rather than contributing to liberal values being embraced, the façade of democracy served the interest of international donors (Sullivan, 2016).

Despite the liberal language in which the Cambodian constitution is scripted, already the first elections are widely referenced to for pointing at the insincerity of the electoral system. Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) initially lost the elections to the royalist FUNCINPEC and party leader Prince Norodom Ranariddh. Yet, the CPP still being in administrative control, bargained its way into shared prime-ministership and coalition government (Karbaum, 2011; Morgenbesser, 2017). In 1997, Hun Sen launched a bloody coup against FUNCINPEC to seize power and become sole prime minister, however still ruling in coalition until 2008. The elections that followed are described as "artificial", "superficial" and of poor quality (Beresford, 2005; Un, 2011). Lee Morgenbesser asks the question of why a leader such as Hun Sen even bothers with holding elections. Morgenbesser is certain that the function of elections for Hun Sen and the CPP is to "[...] renew and reinforce existing state authority (Morgenbesser, 2017:50)", rather than undermine it by making citizens dependent upon the gift-giving practice that campaigning entails. Opposingly, others such as Kheang Un optimistically argue that some aspects of liberal democracy, such as the rule of law, human rights, and accountability, in fact have become an integral part of the Cambodian political sphere as a result of the PPA. Given

these tendencies, a continued democratic discourse offered to Cambodia by the international community, continuous economic growth and a growing middle class may eventually lead to a democratic system of high quality (Un, 2011).

In 2003, opposition front figure and former finance minister Sam Rainsy entered the political stage. He managed to perform a landmark campaign and election in 2013 by joining forces with Kem Sokha's Human Rights Party, merging under the banner of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). The incumbent CPP's heavily funded campaign built on the claim of having brought economic growth and peace to the country. The CNRP on the other hand, building its campaign on volunteers and a newly emerging generation of youth, promised change and to finally free the people from the CPP's power grip (McCargo, 2014). The CNRP tried to visualize the corrupt vote-buying practices of the CPP through the campaign slogan, 'My gasoline, my motorbike, my money, my morale, save my nation. Change! Change! Change!' (Norén-Nilsson, 2017b). Nonetheless, the CPP secured a close victory, a result rejected by Sam Rainsy, who has been in self-imposed exile since 2009 to escape his prison sentence (Un, 2013). The active youth that called for change in the 2013 elections caused scholars of the post-election period to formulate hopeful forecasts of democratic development in Cambodia. A new generation is "coming of age" to revolutionize Hun Sen's Cambodia that for so long has been defined by gift-giving, violence, intimidation, killings, and imprisonment of opposition figures (Soeung, 2016; Sullivan, 2016; Un, 2011). Sophat Soeung considered this generation to "[...] pose the only real long-term challenge to the country's most powerful institution, the CPP (Soeung, 2016:110)". Nonetheless, the 2017 local elections as well as the 2018 national elections saw an increase of violence and suppression, including human rights abuses and threats, as well as CNRP arrests, most prominently of co-party leader Kem Sokha who was charged with treason. In November 2017, the main opposition party was dissolved by Cambodia's Supreme Court—claiming it had plans to topple the government—leaving the CPP without a main competitor in the 2018 elections. Free media was targeted and the right to association had been restricted in 2015 through a new "NGO law" that infringes on the right to assembly. In addition, an economic redirection towards China and a distancing from the West made the façade of democracy further obsolete. Scholars now refer to Hun Sen's regime as a "patrimonial dictatorship" or a "one-party state" (Croissant, 2018). Hun Sen has declared his ambition to lead the country for another ten years and declared he would eliminate those that stand in his way for the sake of "national security" (Croissant, 2018).

The above discussion comprises an attempt to define the version of 'democracy' that Cambodia manifests. Cambodia has most commonly been framed a "hybrid regime"—a concept

introduced by Larry Diamond—to make sense of states in which authoritarian and democratic elements are merged (Lilja, 2010; Un, 2006). It also displays a scholarly endeavour to assess the quality of Cambodian 'democracy', which becomes apparent mainly in scholarly work of the early 2000s, when the assumption of Cambodia being on a linear path from chaos to order, from civil war to democracy, is especially apparent (Albritton, 2004; Beresford, 2005; St John, 2005). What is problematic when depicting Cambodia as a democracy or a version thereof is that the benchmark for what classifies as a democracy is lowered to merely requiring electoral institutions. Therefore, the most engaging kind of research on Cambodian electoral development consists of a subgroup of scholars that aim to re-define and re-imagine 'democracy' for the context of Cambodia, thus, acknowledging that political development is non-linear. Instead, scholars that aim to detect the features of Cambodian-style democracy focus on concepts such as *neo-patrimonialism*, *patron-client* relations and *kinship* (Morgenbesser, 2017; Norén-Nilsson, 2017b; Un, 2011). For example, Astrid Norén-Nilsson (2017b) analyses political clientelism in Cambodia as a tool of representation and "democratic accountability" that provides an alternative to practices of the West. Gift-giving practices and material support that coincide with elections have been an integral part of the CPP's party strategy since the PPA. This strategy endured at least in rural areas a continued voter support. Hun Sen even claims that his regime is a 'people's democracy' that answers to the needs of the farmers and the poor. Mikael Baaz and Mona Lilja (2014) therefore consider the very essence of Cambodian democracy to be found in patron-client power relations.

This section aimed to give a background to Cambodia's political development and dynamics, which is crucial for this research, as it helps us make sense of the political sphere, freedoms and rights that are allocated to the Cambodian people in general and to civil society actors in particular. What follows is a review of the field of literature that analyses Cambodian civil society and possibilities to manoeuvre within it.

2.2   The role and capacity of civil society in Cambodia

Civil society studies are usually rooted in an introductory deliberation of what the concept actually entails. John Locke, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Antonio Gramsci, and Jürgen Habermas are often referred to when trying to establish that civil society in fact is a normative concept that changes over time and context (Alagappa, 2004; Frewer, 2013; Waibel, 2014). Locke, Smith and Ferguson understood civil society to be a modern and developed sphere composed of members that are 'civilized' and organized in their co-existence (Frewer, 2013). Habermas instead considers 'civil society' to refer to a public space for debate. For more recent

scholars such as Muthiah Alagappa, civil society is a space, a site for governance, and an actor at once (Alagappa, 2004). Contemporary conceptualizations often regard 'civil society' a space that provides opportunities to counterbalance repressive or ill-functioning regimes (Waibel, 2014). In this sense, 'civil society' is associated with appropriating functions that prior to what is known as the neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s had been conducted by the state. When it comes to this kind of service provision, 'civil society' is often defined as being composed of non-government organizations (NGOs) providing services that are neglected by the government (Frewer, 2013; Norén-Nilsson, 2017a).

Scholars usually differentiate between the role and function of civil society in authoritarian as opposed to democratic states. While civil society in authoritarian or illiberal regimes often is described as possessing a confrontational relation to the government, in democratic systems, "the state and civil society are mutually dependent for survival (Alagappa, 2004:37)". Alagappa argues further that civil society is "an arena of governance in its own right (Alagappa, 2004:32)". For totalitarian states, he argues, this conceptualization "captures the effort of nonstate groups to carve out areas of governance outside the control of the all-embracing party-state without seeking to alter the regime type (Alagappa, 2004:32)." Scholars disagree when it comes to civil society's ability to initiate change. Some argue that civil society has the potential of catalysing change as it unites and mobilizes people against illiberal governments (Frewer, 2013; Un, 2006). NGOs are often argued to empower citizens on the outskirts of society in claiming rights (Frewer, 2013). Others, however, reject the hypothesis of the connection between civil society and political mobilization for the end of democratic representation (Alagappa, 2004:40). In fact, it is argued that weak civil societies can have antidemocratic effects, as it allows for and reinforces undemocratic structures of clientelism (Alagappa, 2004; Un, 2006).

What function and meaning do scholars attach to civil society in Cambodia? Most commonly, Cambodian civil society is described as weak, lacking a voice, fragmented, donor dependent, easily co-opted, but also as rapidly changing and crucial for correcting state-society imbalances. It is often pointed at that the term 'civil society' historically did not exist in Khmer, nor in many other Confucian and Buddhist countries. Today, the term 'sangkum[1] civil' is widely used with varying connotation and it usually refers to the work of Cambodia's vast NGO sector (Coventry, 2016; Ou & Kim, 2014). With the UN-introduced PPA in 1991, an untapped Cambodian market was unlocked for foreign investment. Thus, NGOs did not emerge naturally or gradually, but were a result of a sudden accessibility to resources (Frewer, 2013; Un, 2006, 2011). Today, the

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[1] *Sangkum* = Society (in khmer)

number of NGOs amounts to about 3,000 (Ou & Kim, 2014:190). However, while the resource availability in the 90s was an unprecedented possibility, the emergence of civil society was hamstringed by traditions of collective passivity (Öjendal, 2014). Civil society is thus treated as an imported concept that was unnaturally introduced to the Cambodian context. Features such as participation and collective action that may be considered building blocks of civil society in the West, "do not come easily in Cambodia (Coventry, 2016:53)". Instead, it is argued that "the functional equivalents of civil society (Coventry, 2016:54)" in Cambodia are kinship and strong hierarchical patron-client relations that base interaction on obligation and debt and 'sangkum' is traditionally a hierarchical rather than horizontal concept (Un, 2006). Thus, it is argued that association and mobilization that goes beyond kinship or patron-client ties are largely absent (Norén-Nilsson, 2017a).

Scholars often argue that Cambodia lacks a number of conditions that are crucial for building a stable and strong civil society. Some scholars argue that the urban middle class is too insignificant in size and that social trust and social capital are too weak to break destructive, hierarchical, clientelist structures (Coventry, 2016; Un, 2006). In addition, flawed grassroots inclusion into the work of NGOs is said to be aggravated by government intimidation and dependency, especially in rural areas (Un, 2011). Also, khmer rouge trauma that is passed on to new generations and fear that has its origins in the current regimes' misconducts, are other phenomena that are used to explain associational passivity (Coventry, 2016; Frewer, 2013). These conditions lead to political participation that, apart from voting, is generally weak (Un, 2011). While scholars commonly equate the vast NGO network with Cambodian civil society, this linkage as well as the role of NGOs in mobilizing the Cambodian people, claiming rights and providing services is also frequently rejected (Ou & Kim, 2014:187). The exponential expansion of the NGO sector since the 90s, while sometimes considered an indication for a growing civil society presence, "rather reflects the strong presence of the donor community in Cambodia (Ou & Kim, 2014:188)". Donor dependency, it is argued, brings the risk of NGOs adjusting their agendas to serve the interests of the donors instead of those of the people (Coventry, 2016; Ou & Kim, 2014:191). In fact, civil society is depicted with a level of instability that allows for co-option from donors as well as from the state. This further exacerbates the already fragmented interests of Cambodian civil society (Coventry, 2016). Tim Frewer, amongst others, argues that Cambodian NGOs are not necessarily an engine for 'good governance' and democracy, but rather, they are embedded in and thus reproduce neo-patrimonial dynamics (Frewer, 2013). Nonetheless, NGOs do occupy a role in Cambodian society, however successful or not, of "attempting to transform the imbalance in the relationship between state and society (Un, 2006:244)". Also, while neo-patrimonial structures are deeply

rooted in Cambodian society, there are tendencies of a diminishing obedience to these norms in urban areas and among a new generation of youth (Coventry, 2016). Especially the 2013 elections were said to confirm the strength of Cambodian civil society. When analysing this timeframe, scholars depict civil society as growing, politically active, emerging, and claiming rights, thereby causing problems for the ruling elite (Soeung, 2016; Sullivan, 2016). However, unfavourable conditions have been intensifying since the 2000s, when the government started to introduce stricter regulations. The recent introduction of the "Law on NGOs and Associations" in 2015 is considered the most restricting of these measures. The law increases government involvement in the work of NGOs, thereby limiting their autonomy (Coventry, 2016; Soeung, 2016). NGOs unsuccessfully united to protest the new legislature and to voice their concerns about the law potentially restricting their spaces for participation (Soeung, 2016). While the government's official stance is that NGOs are an important partner in the development of the country, there is a noticeable distinction between the approach towards a-political NGOs and those working with issues of human rights, governance and democracy (Norén-Nilsson, 2017a; Un, 2006, 2011). Also, youth organizations are scrutinized by the government for fear of their ability to mobilize (Norén-Nilsson, 2017a).

With the relevant existing literature laid out and reviewed, the next section positions the contribution that this thesis gives within this vast amount of scholarly discussion. Thus, the gap that is identified is presented, including this thesis' attempt to fill this gap.

2.3   Gap & positioning

Given that this thesis occupies itself with the current, 2018 post-election period, there is a clear empirical gap that this thesis has the potential of filling. The empirical gap is moreover not only apparent when it comes to the studied timeframe but also when it comes to the demographic that is addressed, namely youth. Despite the fact that many scholars address the potential for change that may lie in the large sector of the population that young people make up, this argument is not further discussed through empirical data collection and is also somewhat dismissed theoretically after the 2013 election loss.

Furthermore, existing literature focuses to a large extent on the endeavour of evaluating the quality of Cambodian democratic institutions and to measure their performance with a western, liberal democratic yardstick. Instead, this thesis follows Jayasuriya and Rodan's scepticism towards hybrid regime and transition theoretical approaches that take linearity of democratic development for granted. Instead of pinpointing the obvious liberal democratic flaws of the Cambodian regime, focus is given to the way that power dynamics and civil society

characteristics that often simply are dismissed as dysfunctional and undemocratic—kinship, patron-client relations, donor dependency, trauma-induced passivity, pressures not to criticise—translate into incentives or disincentives to engage and carve out new forms of engagement. By focusing on these mechanisms of participation and the state's efforts to organize inclusion and exclusion from the political sphere, allows us to gain more fundamental insight into the regime and the citizens that struggle for their access to political resources.

When it comes to the vast literature that aims at characterising Cambodian civil society, this thesis contributes with a novel perspective on civil society that is defined by civil society youth actors themselves. This thesis fills a gap in existing literature in that it not only aims to widen the definition of civil society, but in fact provides insight into the ways in which actors position themselves within civil society depending on their understanding of its meaning and relation to the state. The next chapter discusses the chosen theoretical framework as well as other suitable theoretical approaches that were dismissed in favour of Jayasuriya and Rodan's *modes of participation.*

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter aims to provide an outline of the chosen theory that guides this research. In order to motivate the chose theoretical framework, the next section will elaborate on the suitability of the theory, introduce other theories that could have been applied and discuss why they were not. Thereafter follows an overview of the key elements of the chosen theory, namely Jayasuriya and Rodan's *modes of participation*, and an explanation of how this research operationalizes the chosen framework.

3.1   Discussion of chosen framework

As is outlined in the review of existing literature above, Cambodia's political development trajectory is not an example of a linear path to democracy. Rather, Cambodia displays a number of distinct features and dynamics that are worthy of addressing instead of dismissing them as "mere artefacts of dysfunctional democratic institutions (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:779)" in the common quest of simply labelling Cambodia a failed democracy or a hybrid regime. As Frewer puts it, the country's development "occurs across an unforeseen and novel trajectory characterised by the politics of fear, an enduring system of patron-clientelism, a philosophical foundation of Buddhism, massive influxes of development aid and knowledge, and a modern state bureaucracy (Frewer, 2013:102)". Thus, this research will acknowledge these distinct

dynamics by giving focus to the different ways in which the Cambodian government organizes the "struggle for access to and the distribution of political resources, authority, and legitimacy (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:775)" through different *modes of participation*. Analysing various modes of participation brings insight into a regime's rules and norms that either include or exclude citizens from the political process (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007). Thus, by focusing on the modes of participation that are accessible to Cambodian citizens, we can gain insight into the nature of the 2018 post-election regime.[2] In addition to Jayasuriya and Rodan's approach to participation and contestation, a number of theories are suitable but were dismissed for this thesis. What follows is a short introduction to some of these theories and a discussion of their suitability for this research.

David Lewis presents an interesting approach to participation in authoritarian states, in which he argues that most authoritarian regimes today focus on restricting discursive contestation while allowing NGOs and other associations to formulate their own agendas separate from that of the state. He explores this coexistence of state and civil society associations as a "new type of cooperative relationship (Lewis, 2013:325)" and in fact a way of enhancing regime legitimacy. This approach certainly has the potential of shedding light on the power of discourse in accomplishing contestation, yet, recent restrictions of the autonomy of NGOs—most notably the passing of the "NGO law"—indicates incompatibility.

Another approach that is frequently applied in civil society research is the concept of *political opportunity structure*. Sidney Tarrow, one of the scholars who makes use of this concept, defines political opportunity structure as "signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements (Tarrow, 1996:54)". Opportunities for mobilizing collective action against powerful opponents may be manifested in the availability of new influential allies or power diffusion among elites. Such opportunities can translate into social movements even if those that want to challenge power dynamics are weak and fragmented (Tarrow, 1996). This approach could be adopted for the purpose of testing the hypothesis that collective action in Cambodia currently is paralyzed as a result of an absence of political opportunity. However, it would be more interesting to adopt this approach to the pre- and post-2013 election period, in order to evaluate why the Cambodian civil society was unable to translate the political opportunity into a social movement. The opportunity can now be considered to have come and gone, which is why I dismiss this theory for my research. The next section elaborates further on the chosen theoretical framework.

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[2] In section 3.2, the chosen theory is described in greater detail.

3.2   Chosen framework: *Modes of participation*

Kanishka Jayasuriya and Garry Rodan crafted the theoretical framework of *modes of participation* as a response to the flaws that they identified in transition theoretical and hybrid regime approaches to understanding Southeast Asian regimes. Jayasuriya and Rodan argue that hybrid regime theories ordinarily focus on quality deficiency within democratic institutions vis-à-vis a liberal democratic yardstick, thus disregarding unique state characteristics and power dynamics that may give insight into the nature of a regime. Moreover, Jayasuriya and Rodan are concerned about the hybrid literature's focus on formal representative institution and its negligence when it comes to informal, extra-parliamentary modes of participation, which they consider an inevitable component of the analysis of any regime (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:776). Instead Jayasuriya and Rodan's theoretical approach includes formal as well as informal modes of participation in order to paint a comprehensive picture of the nature of a regime, who and what kind of issues are being represented, and whether or not contestation is achievable (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:779). They write that;

> "Rather than dismissing some modes of participation as mere artefacts of dysfunctional democratic institutions, we seek instead to explain the underlying political dynamics behind such participation (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:779)."

By adopting a holistic approach to the analysis of participation, Jayasuriya and Rodan's theoretical approach enables us to move beyond a sheer critique of the Cambodian states' insufficient configuration of democratic institutions in order to make sense of the ways in which regimes aim to structure and organize the political sphere.

But how then, is this broad idea of participation defined? Political participation is understood as individual or collective engagement for the purpose of requesting rights or resources, over "who gets what, when and how" (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:775). The state then establishes the modes of participation that are legitimately available for individuals and groups, thereby defining the types of people and issues that are included or excluded from political contestation. Thus, the theory's unit of analysis—namely the mode of political participation—is described as "[...] the institutional structures and ideologies that shape the inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:774)" into available modes of political participation. This means that regimes are channelling political participation into modes that are preferred in terms of their ability to absorb political activity without providing opportunities for political contestation. Jayasuriya and Rodan's analysis of modes of participation in Southeast Asia shows that while political participation in fact has increased in the region,

channels for political contestation have narrowed due to regimes' successful practices of exclusion and marginalization of groups and individuals from ill-favoured modes of participation, especially from collective activity (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:774). However, new political spaces may emerge when existing channels are narrowing.

The goal then is to characterize regimes by looking at the ways that modes of participation are facilitated or rejected. Regimes differ in the ways that *conflict* is managed and organized through modes of participation. Thus, identifying and analysing existing modes of participation informs us about the nature of *conflict* that is permissible in the given regime. *Conflict* is used by Jayasuriya and Rodan as referring to "[...] the struggle for access to and the distribution of political resources, authority, and legitimacy (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:775)."

> "Dominant political elites seek to shape modes of participation in a particular direction. That will reflect an underlying political struggle over the forms of representation through which conflict is organized and limited (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:780)."

Thus, by analysing and defining state-sponsored modes of participation, the conflict that is permissible as well as the modes of participation that are autonomously carved out as a reaction to a narrowing political space for contestation, an attempt can be made to characterise the given regime.

In order to map out and define available modes of participation, Jayasuriya and Rodan have designed the below matrix that differentiates between individual versus collective inclusion on the vertical axis and state-sponsored participation versus participation that occurs autonomously from the state. The matrix is displayed below;

Level of Inclusion	Sites of Participation	
	State and Trans-State Sponsored	*Autonomous from the State*
Individual	**Administrative Incorporation** • Grievance Processes (Vietnam) • Feedback Unit (Singapore)	**Individualized Political Expression** • Bloggers • Malaysiakini (Malaysia)
Collective	**Societal Incorporation** • Social Investment Fund (Thailand) • Nominated MPs (Singapore) • Urban Poor (Philippines)	**Civil Society Expression** • Labour Union NGOs (Thailand) Groups •

Figure 1   Source: Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007)

Jayasuriya and Rodan describe state-sponsored individual engagement as entailing a provision of mechanisms to hold public authorities accountable through channels for individual complaints and grievances. Conflict is thereby being de-politicised and transformed into issues of administrative accountability. The ruling elites prefer these individualized, apolitical modes of participation over collective contestation of power (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:787).

Individual modes of participation that are carried through autonomously from the state may include collecting signatures for petitions, direct contact with authorities to claim rights, or—importantly—social media and digital expressions (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:789).

Jayasuriya and Rodan describe state-sponsored collective modes of participation as politically co-opted spaces within which the state wields strategic control. Among others, these may take the form of organizations cooperating with the state or government sponsored initiatives and development projects. These collective modes are addressing conflicts that are defined and approved by the state and therefore render no potential for contestation (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:784).

Lastly, collective modes of participation that are conducted autonomously from the state differ from the above category in their disobedience of state-defined boundaries of what formally is presented as permissible conflict. Thus, this category contains modes of participation that are often criminalized by the state. The space of participation is defined by collective actors themselves rather than by government officials and ruling elites (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007). This concludes the illustration of the theoretical framework and what follows is a description of the operationalization of the theory within this thesis.

3.2.1   Operationalization of theory

Jayasuriya and Rodan focus on exclusion and inclusion into the political sphere along the lines of social class and argue that "[...] modes of participation in the region have militated against the organization and mobilization of collective actors around socio-economic cleavages (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:773)". While this thesis' findings will show evidence of an organization of conflict that disfavours collective participation, class is not the main unit of exclusion. Class-based inequalities in terms of access to material and political resources as well as differences in opportunities for citizens in the provinces and the city are certainly an issue and addressed by the informants that guide this research. Yet, exclusion is rather problematized along the lines of ideology, meaning that the state organizes conflict in a way that emphasizes issues that correspond with the government agenda and excludes those that are considered contradictory.

Most problematically and inconsistently with the empirical data that guides this research, Jayasuriya and Rodan situate civil society—as is commonly done—in the bottom right square of the matrix. What the scholars call 'civil society expressions'—namely collective participation that is autonomous from the state—suggests a definition of civil society that, judging by the empirical data, is too narrow to make sense of civic engagement in Cambodia. Therefore, the sphere of civil society is extended to encompass the whole matrix, thus, including collective as well as individual, formal as well as informal, and state-autonomous as well as state-sponsored modes of participation. Given that this is an extensive re-conceptualization in relation to Jayasuriya and Rodan's framework but also to what is commonly assumed to make up civil society, the first section (5.1) of the analysis is dedicated to this issue.

Furthermore, the sites of participation that define the horizontal axis in Jayasuriya and Rodan's theoretical framework need alteration for it to successfully encompass the thesis' findings. What Jayasuriya and Rodan call "administrative incorporation", meaning individual state-sponsored participation, is absent in the collected data. This does not mean that such modes do

not exist in Cambodia, yet, if they do, the thesis' informants have not discussed them. The remaining two categories give a fair initial description of the modes of participation that emerged in the data.

Thus, Jayasuriya and Rodan's matrix is slightly altered, still focusing on individual versus collective participation on the vertical axis but highlighting "government agenda conformity" versus "government agenda deviance" on the horizontal axis, with all four sites representing spheres of Cambodian civil society. The matrix is displayed below;

Level of inclusion	Sites of participation	
	Government agenda-conformity (State sponsored)	Government agenda-deviance (autonomous from the state)
Individual	Social entrepreneurs Leadership & employment skills educators Gender/LGBTI activists	Social media activists Political, human and environmental rights educators
Collective	State-led youth activities Ministry-level cooperation IT, economy, employment skills training platforms	Khmer rouge reconciliation NGOs Critical debate & discussion platforms Youth NGOs Gender/LGBTI NGOs Human rights & environmental protection NGOs

Figure 2   Source: By author

The analysis is organized according to this matrix, discussing the modes of participation that became evident in my data, the conflict—meaning the struggle for political resources—that is expressed by the interviewees, and the different modes' potential for contestation. By focusing on these four categories of participation, we can get an idea of the ways through which the state organizes conflict, the conflicts that are permissible, and who is being represented through these available modes. Thus, what is important for the analysis is to find out about the "[...] emerging modes of political participation and the forms of conflict which they serve to express or repress (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:781)".

In the next chapter, the methodological choices that were made for this thesis are presented and discussed.

4. METHODOLOGY

The methods chapter consists of the following sections; a brief summary of the research design gives an overview of the study. Thereafter, the ontological and epistemological positioning is discussed in order to inform the reader about the way that the data is handled and approached. Section 4.3 introduces the reader to the fundamentals of the methodological approach that is chosen for this research, namely discourse analysis. Subsequently, the sampling and data collection method is laid out in great detail, given its importance for understanding the nature of the empirical data. Lastly—but arguably most importantly for this study—ethical considerations and reflexivity are addressed.

4.1   Research design

Qualitative rather than quantitative research has been chosen for this thesis, thus checking the four main features that characterize qualitative research; words are more important than numbers, theory is formulated inductively, the epistemological position is interpretivist, and the ontological position is constructivist (Bryman, 2012:380). Given the chosen data collection method of semi-structured interviewing, a qualitative approach is deemed most suitable, thereby making words the main unit of interpretation. Also, the theoretical approach of Jayasuriya and Rodan's *modes of participation* allow us to grasp and interpret the reality of participation that our interviewees construct in their narratives. The research is designed in the form of a case study, meaning the "intensive examination of the setting (Bryman, 2012:67)" that empowers and confines youth engagement in the city of Phnom Penh in Cambodia after the 2018 election. Discourse analysis is the chosen methodological approach for this research as it allows us to put great emphasis on interpretation of language. Nonetheless, there is a minor quantitative aspect to this research in order to triangulate findings, given that words are counted, and codes are cross-referenced using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo (Bryman, 2012:392). The next section serves the important purpose of laying out the ontological and epistemological assumptions that the empirics are approached with in this thesis.

4.2   Ontology and epistemology

This thesis builds on the ontological assumption that reality is constructed and repeatedly reconstructed through social interaction (Bryman, 2012:33). Thus, the notion that there is one single, objective reality waiting for us to be discovered, a reality that exists independently of

agency—as often assumed within quantitative approaches—is rejected. The collected data is considered an illustration of the research participants' various versions of reality, constructed to interpret the context they are situated within. Reality is thereby assumed to be highly dependent on agency as it is constructed by the participants themselves. This view on reality is especially suitable for the analysis of the diverse perceptions that the interview participants have of Cambodian civic space. This assumption is also in line with the thesis' chosen method—*discourse analysis*—as it is a tool for understanding and analysing the role that language plays in the construction of these versions of reality (Bryman, 2012:34). Discourse analysis is elaborated upon in the next section. The ontological positioning logically leads us to the epistemology—the question of what is considered knowledge—of *interpretivism*. The data, thus, is treated not as a text containing a set of truths or facts. The goal is not to use the collected data for *explaining* a phenomenon, but rather, for interpreting and *understanding* human action (Bryman, 2012:28).

4.3   Discourse analysis

Given the ontology and epistemology that guides this research and that is depicted above, *discourse analysis* is a suitable method since it through deconstruction facilitates access to the research subjects' construction of versions of realities that their language contains. Hence, language within discourse analysis is understood as "[...] constituting or producing the social world (Bryman, 2012:528)". Thus, language is regarded a bearer of meaning that is in need of deconstruction to enable us to make sense of the building blocks that are used to describe one's surroundings.

Through discourse, we make sense of the world, construct and reconstruct it to build our understanding of it through interaction (Bryman, 2012:530). This also means that by applying the method of discourse analysis, emphasis is given to the deconstruction of taken-for-granted concepts and assumptions (Gill, 2000:173). We are in this thesis interested in the discourse itself, meaning the versions of realities that the research subjects have constructed through discourse. This means that "[...] discourse is a focus of enquiry itself and not a means of gaining access to aspects of social reality that lie behind it (Bryman, 2012:530)". With a basic description of the fundamentals of discourse analysis, the next section lays out the operationalization of the research method.

4.3.1 Operationalization of research method

After having collected the data, the first stage was to critically engage with the transcripts, to read and re-read in order to even grasp concepts that may have been hidden to me due to my personal biases and assumptions. This repeated engagement with the data also has the purpose of re-examining taken-for-granted concepts and knowledge (Gill, 2000:178). Thereafter, the data was coded with the help of NVivo—a qualitative data analysis software package—that helped get a better overview over the vast amount of data that had accumulated. Coding in NVivo helps to better organize the data and see patterns and dissimilarities within it. After coding all of the data, a specific code—for instance "risks and crackdown"—could be chosen to gain a collected image of all interviewees' mention of this specific code. Also, by cross-referencing codes, knowledge could be gained about the frequency to which different codes overlap. For example, the code "enemy status" frequently overlapped with the code "civil society", which is an insight into the data that then could be pursued further.

Rosalind Gill suggests that initial coding should be conducted in an inclusive manner to avoid discarding patterns and nuances of a text due to personal biases (Gill, 2000:179). That approach lead to 55 initial codes, some of which could be merged and dismissed after careful evaluation if doomed irrelevant for the purpose of the research. After initial, inclusive coding, the search for patterns began. Given that the group of interviewees that participated in this research is rather diverse when it comes to their topical focus of interest, the main goal was not to generalize but rather to find particularities and inconsistencies in the data, but also to find consistencies throughout the data that emerge despite the data's diversity. Patterns that were found in the data were then used to form tentative hypotheses about the function of the language that was used to subsequently return to the data and test these hypotheses (Gill, 2000:178). This approach helped elucidate the function of the language that is used to describe the modes of participation that are exercised and the way that these modes are positioned in relation to the state. The next section aims to give insight into the sampling and data collection method that was employed. This is important as it provides transparency about the handling of the empirical data.

4.4   Sampling and data collection

Initial contact to the field was provided by a gatekeeper who is familiar with Cambodian civil society. This allowed me to enter the field with three initial contacts to youth actors in Phnom Penh. This initial sampling was purposive in the sense that the gatekeeper was informed about the nature of my research and the characteristics and demographics I was looking for in my

informants (Bryman, 2012:461). Thus, the gatekeeper functioned as a facilitator to the research, meaning that trust could be gained through the referral and insight could be gained to the very vast sphere of civil society in Cambodia to identify key actors (Rossman & Rallis, 2012:160; Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:172). When entering the field, the small initial sample size was worrisome, however, the research subjects were well connected, which allowed for a smoothly progressing snowball sampling throughout the rest of the fieldwork (Bryman, 2012:424). Gaining access to further informants through snowballing also allowed me to contact the proposed people by reference to someone they trusted, which was crucial for avoiding suspicion or mistrust. Snowball sampling enabled me to gain access to 16 research participants for in-depth interviews. I initiated contact with potential informants through Facebook messenger, WhatsApp or e-mail, as these are the means of communication that are considered the safest by young people operating in civil society.

14 of the 16 interviewees consider themselves 'youth' actors in civil society, with ages between 28 and 38. Two interviewees are not themselves 'youth', but focus on youth engagement, youth education and organization in their work. All of the informants have obtained a university-level degree, either abroad or in Cambodia, or are in the process of doing so. Interestingly, the majority of them grew up in the countryside and moved to Phnom Penh to study. Two of the 16 interviewees are foreigners working at international NGOs, the other 14 are Cambodian citizens. Only four of the 16 research participants are women, which could be considered problematic. However, when deliberating about this with a Cambodian researcher focusing on civil society engagement, I learned that this may in fact be a representative sample given that civil society participation is male dominated. Nonetheless, the participants form a heterogenous group of people. All of them are in one way or another initiators in civil society, yet, dedicate their commitment to a range of different issues. Their engagement ranges from human rights to environmental protection, gender equality, LGBTI rights, corruption, peace and reconciliation, youth participation, leadership and education, and entrepreneurship. It was a conscious choice to include this wide range of issues into the sample, built on the assumption that youth participation and spaces for participation are very much dependent on the issue that is being addressed. Thus, the informants' diverging topical interests provide an interesting comparative aspect to the heterogeneity of civil society in Cambodia and the possibilities— or lack thereof— for young people to engage. This choice however meant that a trade-off was made between a generalizable, homogenous sample that focuses on one specific issue, and a non-generalizable group that instead provides insights into the fragmented nature of civil society and youth engagement. Still, theoretical saturation could be achieved (Bryman, 2012:425) and clear

patterns emerged that can inform us about the *modes of participation* that are available to young people in Cambodian civil society after the recent elections.

The method of data collection that was applied is semi-structured interviewing in order to put emphasis on flexibility and an opportunity of departing from the planned interview guide (Bryman, 2012:470). Given the topic's sensitivity, it was crucial to pose questions in a manner that allowed the interviewees to decide on the degree to which sensitive information and experiences were shared. Issues that emerged were pursued through follow-up questions, thus, allowing the informant to guide the interview to some extent. Yet, an interview guide that contained a number of key topics[3] that were to be covered was followed to ensure that the information that is needed to answer the thesis' research questions are touched upon (Bryman, 2012:473). Importantly, for key concepts in the research such as 'civil society' it was important not to enter the field with a prior definition, but instead, let the participants define what the concept entails for them and how they position themselves within this definition. As Kvale and Brinkman stress, there is a great extent of skill asked of a researcher entering the field and personal judgement has to guide the questions that are being asked (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:82). This is especially important for research that, if conducted inconsiderately, could put the informants at risk. To ensure that the research participants feel safe, they were asked to decide on the location for the interview. Interestingly, most of the participants chose a public place such as a café for the location of the interview, which was surprising considering the stories they shared about the risks of surveillance. Some of them chose to meet at their offices or at secluded meeting rooms at restaurants. In some cases, a prior meeting was scheduled to get to know each other and instil trust. However, trust did not seem to be an issue and the participants were generally eager to share their experiences, fears and hopes. According to one of my informants, this had a lot to do with me being a foreigner, thus being an outsider to a system within which it sometimes is difficult to know who to trust.

All but one of the interviews were held in English and given the participants educational level, the language proficiency was very high. This ensured a smooth interview process without insecurities and misunderstandings. Nonetheless, one interview was held in Khmer language, with one of my initial contacts functioning as interpreter. Since the interviewee and interpreter were not familiar with each other, there was some noticeable initial discomfort. Also, through translation, the interviewees exact choice of words and phrases was compromised. Therefore, this interview has not been cited and less emphasis is given to the way ideas were expressed, but rather to what was being said in a broader sense. The interviews were about one hour to one

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[3] The interview guide is displayed in the appendix.

hour and a half in length and they were all audio-recorded, which all of the participants agreed to beforehand. The interviews were later transcribed from beginning to end, in order not to dismiss parts of the interviews as insignificant before entering the coding phase of the analysis. When entering the field, one ambition was to conduct participatory observations as an additional source of data. I did participate in three separate dialogues/discussion events but the number of events that were held during the time I was in Phnom Penh was not significant enough to build findings on. The next section is especially important for this kind of research, that demands a high level of sensitivity due to the potential risks it holds for both the interviewee and the interviewee.

4.5   Ethical considerations and reflexivity

Given the sensitive research topic and the current political oppression and crackdown on regime critics, this section is especially important. Here, we lay out how risks and ethical concerns have been addressed to ensure that benefits outweigh risks (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:73) and how interviewees are protected in the highest possible degree. This section also demonstrates awareness of my own role as a researcher and the shortcomings of the approach that was taken. In what follows, ethical considerations that were part of the entire research process—prior to entering, during the collection of data, and after leaving the field—are laid out and limitations are addressed.

Before initiating this research, there was a necessity to deliberate whether or not the research would be ethical by anticipating, identifying and circumventing potential harm to participants. Scheyvens and McLennan argue that ethical research not only prevents harm but indeed does good and empowers (Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:160). The participants in my research were all eager to share their stories and many of them even thanked me for making their voices heard, which may indicate that their participation in fact strengthens their self-esteem for continuing their engagement. Nonetheless, the fact that the research participants express gratitude may pose another ethical concern, namely the question of *reciprocity*. Since it is uncertain how many people will read this research, the reciprocity they hope for—being to highlight the problems they face—is uncertain despite the fact that a Cambodian thinktank expressed interest in publishing my findings. Nonetheless, reciprocity can be achieved through a feeling, sense of empowerment, significance or simply the knowledge that they are key actors in a research project (Rossman & Rallis, 2012:158; Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:174). Additionally, feeding back my findings to the research participants may provide them with guidance, self-esteem, valuable insight or grounds for discussion (Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:178), which

may be especially valuable in a time of increasing oppression and pressure to be passive exerted by the government.

In order to achieve informed consent, potential participants were informed about the objectives, aims and processes of the research as well as about their rights to withdraw the information they have shared at any time (Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:164). The participants were also informed about their right to withhold answers to any question and to ask about the research at any time. While ethics committees usually urge for 'consent forms' to be signed, I decided to seek consent orally for this project. Scheyvens and McLennan write that people living within a suppressive regime characterized by surveillance and mistrust may be cautious to sign documents in the fear that they may fall in the hands of government officials. Also, written consent may reinforce a sentiment of unequal power relations between the researcher and the research subject that in fact undermines trust (Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:166). Thus, informal informed consent was deemed the better choice with the safety of the participants in mind. While gatekeepers can facilitate access to the field, they can also pose potential ethical hazards and limit the scope of informed consent if research subjects feel pressured to participate (Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:164). However, while this mainly is the case in hierarchical settings, there is no power imbalance between this research's gatekeeper and the informants. Power imbalance is a general ethical concern also when it comes to the interviewer/interviewee relations. Entering the field as a western researcher raises questions about representing the "other" in a manner not to "reinforce patterns of domination (Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:6)". In a general sense, when entering the field as an external actor my presence is accompanied by an association to liberal values of democracy and freedom that may impact the participants' answers. However, on an individual level, given my age, gender and occupational level relative to theirs, power imbalance did not pose a tangible ethical issue. This brings us to another important deliberation, that of *reflexivity*, meaning the awareness of my personal biases and values in the production of knowledge (Bryman, 2012:393). Given that I identified strongly with the research subjects' cause and fight for participation in a society in which they are denied political rights, it was important to actively seek to maintain a professional distance, hence, to avoid 'going native' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:75). Nonetheless, values are unavoidable and as Bryman phrases it, "the social researcher is never conducting an investigation in a moral vacuum (Bryman, 2012:149)". It is therefore important to be aware of the values that I bring to the field that may have an impact on the knowledge that is produced and the stories that are being shared rather than attempting to forge a value-neutral research environment.

Furthermore, participants were informed about their identity being protected through the use of

pseudonyms and the names of their organizations being concealed (Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:168). Some of the participants that voice their opinions in public and social media did not mind about their names being used. Nonetheless, since potential harm to the participants cannot be ruled out, identities are not revealed. Participants were asked whether or not they consented to being recorded, which all of them did. Alan Bryman warns that interview participants may be alarmed or self-conscious when a microphone is used (Bryman, 2012:482). When entering the field, this was a concern and rightfully so given that the interviewees on several occasions expressed their concerns about electronics being bugged by the government to detect regime critics. Nonetheless, as far as I can tell, the stories were sincere and not altered due to a fear of scrutiny. Also, for the sake of confidentiality, fieldnotes, recordings and transcripts have been stored securely throughout the entire research process (Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014:169). This concludes the background to the research, thus, in what follows, the research findings are presented.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

> "Cambodian civic space is relatively small or almost no more, so that is why we are moving another way to find the space to exercise our freedom." (Interview, Bunheng)

The recent years—prior to and after the elections in 2018—mark a period in time in Cambodia that is characterized by an increasing scarcity of political rights, an enactment of a number of new laws to tighten government control, and a crackdown on critics and activists. Youth, especially, is a demographic that due to its mobility, size and strength has gained increasing attention from the government, with growing attempts to de-politicise and co-opt youth activities and groups (Norén-Nilsson, 2017a). The analysis that follows aims to illustrate how the current state of increasing oppression is accompanied by civil society actors carving out new modes of participation that may not resonate with common assumptions (Alagappa, 2004) about the boundaries that define 'civil society'. This thesis therefore argues for a widening of the concept of 'civil society' to encompass collective as well as individual, formal, informal, state-sponsored and state-autonomous modes of participation. Only then, we can paint a holistic picture of the movement towards new forms of engagement that actors initiate in their struggle for access to political resources. Thus, Jayasuriya and Rodan's (2007) theoretical framework makes possible an analysis of modes of participation that are (un)available to civil society actors or that are carved out anew as a result of a struggle for access. The modes of participation that are made available by the government give insight into the government's organization of conflict and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from the political sphere, as well as whether

or not contestation of government power is conceivable. Thus, the analysis of interviewees' civic engagement allows us to answer the following research questions; How do civil society actors adapt their strategies of participation to what is now considered a one-party state? What *modes of participation* are accessible to (collective and individual) civil society actors and how do they make use of them? What *modes of participation* are accessible to (collective and individual) civil society actors, meaning how does the government organize and manage *conflict*? What does the availability or lack of *modes of participation* tell us about the 2018 post-election regime?

Before we start, an important remark here is that 'state' and 'government' are concepts that for the case of Cambodia sometimes are difficult to differentiate, given the lack of power shifts and Hun Sen's control over much of the state apparatus. As was observed in the collected data, interviewees consider the government to have total control over the state apparatus and the functions it performs. Since boundaries between these two concepts are unclear, they are sometimes used interchangeably in the analysis. The names that are used in the analysis that follows are pseudonyms.

The analysis proceeds as follows; in section 5.1, the concept of civil society is discussed in accordance with the research participants' understanding of it and their positioning within it. In section 5.2, individual modes of participation are laid out, first those that are resonate with the government agenda (5.2.1) and thereafter those that deviate from the government's agenda (5.2.2). Section 5.3, then, addresses collective modes of participation, both those that are in line with official government interests (5.3.1) and those that are not (5.3.2).

5.1   Conceptualizing civil society

Most of the research participants characterized themselves as 'civil society' actors, independently of their participation being of collective or individual nature. However, in Jayasuriya and Rodan's theoretical framework, it is suggested that civil society expressions take form exclusively in a collective manner. It is thus of essence to re-conceptualize civil society in accordance with the research participants' understanding of it and their positioning within this concept. In the literature review we have established that civil society is a concept whose meaning is changing depending on its context (Alagappa, 2004; Frewer, 2013; Waibel, 2014). What follows is an illustration of the 'civil society' (*sangkum civil*) that Cambodian youth actors position themselves in.

A number of the participants in the research problematize that civil society in Cambodia often is treated in terms of an assumed equivalency with non-governmental organizations, which is a

claim that is often made but also often criticised in existing research (Ou & Kim, 2014:187). This is a rather excluding understanding of civic space, restricted to collective, organized and formal engagement. It poses a problem for the endeavours of individuals, grassroots and informal actors to operate and effect the agenda for change. Human rights activist and NGO member Bunheng defines civil society as follows;

> "Civil society is all people, average humans that are working for the social cause. Including informal groups of people and formal organizations, unions, foundations, all people in the society who have been working with a social cause for the society as a whole." (Interview, Bunheng)

The above statement is an attempt to widen the common definition of civil society to an incorporating, inclusive sphere that is capable of accommodating a variety of actors and forms of engagement. Thus, civil society engagement may be individual or collective. The important criterion of inclusion is the work for the 'social cause', to do good 'for the society as a whole', for fellow citizens and the development of the country. This struggle for re-imagining the sphere of civil society is a struggle for access into civic space. By questioning the domination of civil society by NGOs and INGOs—that often are said to apply a top-down approach to setting their agenda for development—grassroots and individual voices are excluded from participating in the political space. The importance of independence from government and donor pressure is emphasized in a number of the interviews. This echoes the concerns of co-option that are expressed in existing literature on Cambodian civil society (Coventry, 2016; Ou & Kim, 2014).

While there is an emphasis on independence from the state when it comes to civil society activities, interviewees also express a strong belief in civil society and government cooperation, thus, a belief that the two spheres should not be operating detached from each other. The empirical data displays an overwhelming frequency to which 'civil society' was described in terms of a desire for cooperation with the government and to fill the function of a 'watchdog' and a 'mirror' for the government to reflect about and visualize the issue on the ground. However, this desire for partnership is described as being denied, at least when it comes to groups or individuals that do not follow the agenda of the government. Instead, interviewees often used the word 'enemy' to set a label on the way that they believe that the government regards them. One of the interviewees, Oudom, who works with peace and reconciliation in the provinces says that;

> "I believe that civil society organizations are the watchdog, because they try to monitor what the shortages of policy are. [...] If we see something wrong, we need to tell the public.

But mostly, if we tell the truth, we become the opposition. So, what is our space then, if we cannot raise what is happening?" (Interview, Oudom)

As becomes evident in the statement above, attaining this opposition or enemy status renders civil society actors insecure about the spaces that are at their disposal to operate within. The depiction of seeing something 'wrong' and not being listened to when telling the 'truth' leaves them unable to fulfil what they consider their role in society. The interviewees share that they long for a relation to the government that Alagappa describes as characteristic within democratic systems of governance, namely a "mutual dependency" and cooperation (Alagappa, 2004:37). Instead, what they experience is the allocation of an 'enemy' status that resonates with Alagappa's claim that civil society in illiberal regimes often occupy a "confrontational" relation to the state. Thus, Alagappa argues that civil society in democratically flawed countries is "an arena of governance" in which actors aim to carve out spaces for participation that lie outside of state control (Alagappa, 2004:32), which is a struggle that is obvious in our data. Yet, what should be added is that while civil society in Cambodia is in fact a "arena of governance" in which access is claimed, it is also—and this is important—an arena in which partnership is requested.

Also, what becomes apparent in the data is that in the case of Cambodia, the 'enemy' status does not affect all of civil society but is allocated with a specific logic. As is suggested in much of the literature that discusses Cambodia, civil society is in fact depicted as rather fragmented (Coventry, 2016). The empirical data shows that civil society in Cambodia cannot be described as one entity that finds itself in a confrontational relation with the government. Rather, confrontation is forged only within instances when government interests are at risk. The share of civil society that contributes to or at least refrains from opposing the government agenda is indeed very much qualified to cultivate a partnership with government authorities. Bunheng continues with his definition of civil society;

"Some of them have been in a really friendly relation with the government, especially those who are helping the government interest, they are considered friends. Those who work against the government's official interests, they are considered enemies." (Interview, Bunheng)

Thus, civil society is depicted as divided into enemies and friends depending on actors' compliance with the government agenda, as is suggested in existing literature discussing Prime Minister Hun Sen's approach towards political and a-political actors (Norén-Nilsson, 2017a; Un, 2006, 2011). There are in fact clear patterns in the data that tie feelings of opposition/enemy categorization by the government to topics such as human rights, democracy, active citizenship

or environmental protection. When it comes to civil society actors working with issues that resonate with core interests of the government agenda—economic development, social entrepreneurship or IT and employment skills—the relation to the government is depicted as unproblematic, welcoming and supportive. Social entrepreneur Bophany describes her relation to the government in the statement below;

> "When I contact them and try to talk to them, they are really welcoming. Because I am doing something to support the community, support the society. So, they are welcoming and try to support me." (Interview, Bophany)

In fact, civil society is a concept that due to its unproblematic nature for this group of actors is not necessarily even reflected upon. This is displayed in Bophany's response when asked about her perception of *sangkum civil*;

> "What do you mean by civil society? I have no idea..." (Interview, Bophany)[4]

Nonetheless, this enemy/friend dichotomy is not sufficient for encompassing the civil society descriptions of all research participants. There is also a grey zone of participants who are critical and that problematize the role that civil society is allowed to play in today's Cambodia, yet, who target issues that are neither in line with nor contradicting government interests. These issues are gender equality, LGBTI rights, as well as peace and reconciliation. Oudom, who is working with reconciliation for victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide in the communities describes his efforts to approach the government and gain legitimacy for his work;

> "We play along with a lot of stuff. We cooperate so that they understand we don't do anything against them. They appreciate that kind of work, they value it, because they think, okay, this is also a kind of work that could be a partner to join in the development and community building." (Interview, Oudom)

This means that rather than a dichotomous distinction between enemies and friends of the government, it may be more accurate to distinguish civil society actors along the lines of a scale or a degree of acceptance. There is an apparent correlation between the degree to which interviewees deviate from government interests and their sentiments of disapproval directed to them by the government. The spaces that are available to the different actors, meaning their levels of inclusion and exclusion into the political sphere, are highly dependent on their conformity with the government agenda.

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[4] However, as is shown in section 5.2, youth actors that conduct individual participation that is in harmony with government interests most commonly still consider themselves civil society actors.

In summary, referring to Cambodia's vast NGO sector for defining the country's civil society is an insufficient attempt of grasping the varying forms that the struggle for political resources may take. Ranging from individual to collective and from challenging government interests to corresponding with them. Thus, in order to make sense of Cambodian civic space, we are in need of a thorough analysis of the different modes of participation that actors aim to occupy. These are, quite appropriately, organized by individual versus collective modes and government-agenda conformity versus government-agenda deviance. The figure below, borrowed from Jayasuriya and Rodan and altered to fit the Cambodian case, illustrates the logic with which the rest of the analysis is approached;

Level of inclusion	Sites of participation	
	Government agenda-conformity (State sponsored)	Government agenda-deviance (autonomous from the state)
I n d i v i d u a l	Social entrepreneurs Leadership & employment skills educators Gender/LGBTI activists	Social media activists Political, human and environmental rights educators
C o l l e c t i v e	State-led youth activities Ministry-level cooperation IT, economy, employment skills training platforms	Khmer rouge reconciliation NGOs Critical debate & discussion platforms Youth NGOs Gender/LGBTI NGOs Human rights & environmental protection NGOs

Figure 2   Source: By author

Thus, in the next section, we turn to the first two squares of the matrix, namely individual modes of participation.

5.2   Individual modes of participation

This section of the analysis gives insight into the individual modes of participation that the research subjects engage themselves in. These may either be in line with government interests (sub-section 5.2.1) or deviate from the government agenda (discussed in sub-section 5.2.2). As expressed by Jayasuriya and Rodan, differentiating between individual and collective "levels

of inclusion" may be a dubious undertaking at times, given that individual action can be conducted by key actors within a collective movement or institution (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:783). In fact, the majority of interviewees participating in this study are key players or initiators of groups or organizations. Nonetheless, special emphasis was given during the interview process to differentiate between modes of participation that are conducted in the name of the group or individually.

5.2.1 Government-agenda conformity

Individuals that operate within the first square of our matrix engage in civil society in correspondence with official government interests. As is indicated in the matrix above, participation focuses on issues such as social entrepreneurship, employment skills education and moral leadership. To some extent, gender and LGBTI rights engagement can also be considered here given that some of the activities performed by these individuals are accepted and some are criticised by the government. Interviewees that shared their experiences about government-approved individual participation frequently talked about 'support' from the government, about 'partnership' and the accessibility to 'help/aid' when they face challenges in their engagement. In the citation below, social entrepreneur Bophany, who supports local farmers, elaborates on her relation to the government;

> "They know me well, so we can talk, what the challenges are that I am facing, what I need from them to support me. [...] I am not sure how other people are working with them, but I feel I can talk to them. I can suggest something, I address a problem and say what the Ministry can do to help." (Interview, Bophany)

In the above statement, Bophany suggests a personal connection to the state authorities, 'they know her well' and are familiar with her, which facilitates dialogue. Authorities are in fact 'welcoming' towards her requests of support. She reasons that this subsidiary treatment of the government stems from her contribution to society and the support she gives to the community. Interestingly, and this will be shown in sub-section 5.2.2, individual actors that have a human rights approach to supporting the community are not welcomed into this affiliation of familiarity. Bophany, however, considers government authorities to be 'open', supportive and easily accessible. In fact, she considers herself dictating the terms of the exchange.

When it comes to non-critical individual modes of participation, limitations to the engagement that interviewees experience are most commonly linked to budget and financial resources. When it comes to gender and LGBTI engagement, limitations are also experienced in relation to traditions and norms. Limitations that are linked to risks and government crackdown—as is

most commonly referred to within government-agenda deviant modes of participation—are absent for individual government-agenda conformity.

Gender norms activist Mealea, who travels to provinces to educate local residents about gender norms and inequalities, shares that the difficulties she faces simply have to do with the static nature of norms. When asked whether she ever feels that she is afraid to engage, she responds;

> "No, never. I don't think that there would be so much risk because I am not doing anything wrong. When you say you work with changing the norms, they would not care, but if you say you are supporting women groups in handling the land grab, they see these women as trouble makers, because it is affecting their interests. But social norms, they don't care." (Interview, Mealea)

Scholars are usually depicting gender norms and traditional ideals of women's' roles as ingrained in the hierarchical structure of traditional cultures, which makes it difficult for women to renegotiate their gendered identities (Brickell, 2010; Ong, 2011). Nonetheless, Cambodian women are also described as actively challenging traditional gender norms, "[...] to (de)stabilize putatively traditional ideals of Cambodian womanhood and to (re)situate them in the contemporary period (Brickell, 2010:437)." Still, the way in which Mealea describes that the government grants her attempts to reimagine Cambodian gender norms is somewhat surprising. Mealea explains this by arguing that challenging norms is not considered a direct threat to the government's power and is therefore overlooked. Thus, the government is focusing its attention on restricting actors and their activities that neglect obedience to the government agenda.

In addition to a-political actors such as Bophany, this first division of the matrix also hosts individuals who have earlier occupied government-agenda critical individual modes of participation or do so in addition to their non-critical engagement. One such example is provided by Arun, an LGBTI activist who is rather critical in his work and will therefore be included into section 5.2.2 of the analysis. Still, Arun also invests his own resources into accommodation for struggling students. He explains that they reciprocate by paying back to society;

> "They have to volunteer for children, disabled... If they don't, they cannot stay here. So, they don't need to pay me, they need to pay to the society." (Interview, Arun)

This kind of engagement, the endeavour to inspire others to contribute to the society as well, is a reoccurring theme throughout the data and can be found within all four divisions of the matrix.

Chann, another one of my interviewees, is a political rights educator that for the past eight years has organized a political discussion forum and has recently initiated a call centre for young

people wondering about potential career paths, vocational education and entrepreneurship. Chann describes this shifting focus in his work;

> "This is a new approach for me, that is safe, that is what the government wants us to do, education and technology. But then they can still ask me anything." (Interview, Chann)

Thus, Chann customizes his participation according to what the government 'wants' us—meaning civil society actors—to do. He tailors his activities to those modes of participation that are made legitimately available by the government (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007). Nonetheless, Chann emphasizes that this mode of participation, while in line with government interests, provides an opportunity to critique and "do content, have a discussion, do politics a little bit", as Chann reveals. Chann's statement is not unique but reoccurring in the data. Interviewees frequently describe a necessity to adapt to the current political situation. A 'new approach' is necessary to adapt to the increasing suppression and intensifying risk for crackdown, it is often argued. While interviewees have different ideas about what this new approach entails, one common trait is an avoidance of confrontational wording.

> "You don't need to say politics, you say something else. The government really hates the word advocacy, the word empowerment, change, that really gets the government crazy." (Interview, Chann)

Thus, these new modes of participation emerged as a reaction to government discontent and increasing risks. These new modes are—at least on the surface—in line with official government interests. On the one hand, following Chann's checklist of confrontational terminology can be considered a strategy for constructing a disguise for continuous engagement. Yet, on the other hand, it may be considered an example of the government's successful exclusion and marginalization of ill-favoured modes of participation, which would mean that the channels for contestation are in fact narrowing (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:775). International NGO employee Julia who is working at a Cambodian youth centre says;

> "I see that we need to be careful because if you talk about civil society in Cambodia and then they take the words away, it gets more blurry what civil society might stand for." (Interview, Julia)

In fact, there is a plurality to the times that interviewees problematize that power dynamics infringe on individual's own agendas. Vanna, a researcher at a Cambodian thinktank that specializes on democracy and development shares his experience;

> "Many of the young people become so passionate and allergic to the corrupt system. But after a few years many of them change. They get corrupted by the system, they enjoy the

lucrative benefits when they get a good position. Their passion fades away as time passes by. It's too difficult to change the system. They want to change the system, but when they are in the system, the system changes them." (Interview, Vanna)

Thus, as is widely discussed in existing literature, mechanisms of clientelism and hierarchical oppression (Morgenbesser, 2017; Un, 2011) are too difficult to withstand and thereby function as a means to de-politicise and defuse a 'passionate' youth that could potentially be capable of contesting state power. The power dynamics and reward-mechanisms that permeate the system function as a means to channel and absorb political participation into government-preferred modes of participation (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007).

In summary, this first sphere of the matrix accommodates individual youth actors whose participation corresponds with government interests. In addition, actors who tailor their activities to government expectations or to the space that is made available by the government as a result of increasing restrictions. Irrespective of the adaptation to government-preferred modes of participation being a disguise for continuous criticism or a sincere renunciation of critical thoughts, it may bring the risk of resulting in a further narrowing of channels for contestation due to a diminishing scope of terminology to operate within.

5.2.2   Government-agenda deviance

This next site of participation—government agenda-deviant individual participation—is equivalent to Jayasuriya and Rodan's *individualized political expression*. The scholars categorize this site of participation as "[...] micro-actions that individuals undertake to influence public policy and governance directly or indirectly (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:789)". A list of examples that the scholars provide includes the signing of petitions, seeking contact with government officials, and boycotting imported products. Examples of such micro-action that emerged in the empirical data are social media activities, one-on-one meetings with community leaders, visiting people's homes to spread awareness, withholding election votes etc. In this second category of individual participation, civil society actors focus on issues such as human rights, environmental protection and land rights, political rights and to some extent also LGBTI rights. The individual actors that are discussed in this section of the analysis are threefold; firstly, people who are NGO-workers and who, in addition to their collective engagement, devote their free time to advocating about their cause. Secondly, individuals who are social media activists, grassroots supporters, or educators who chose not to register with the government, which enables them to work detached from state control. Thirdly, former NGO staff members that were forced into individual engagement due to their organization being shut

down or blacklisted. In what follows, individual participation that deviates from official government interest is discussed to gain insight into the struggle for access to political resources that takes place in this sphere of civil society.

While 'support', 'partnership', and access to 'help' were reoccurring themes in government-approved individual participation, in the share of the empirical data in which government-agenda deviant individual participation is discussed, themes such as 'risk', 'fear', and 'pressure to be passive' emerged instead. Perceived limitations also differ significantly and are for individuals that are situated within this category of participation no longer tied to financial resources and traditions. Instead, opportunities for critical individual participation are often described as limited through the risks that such engagement could cause others. For individually engaging NGO workers, this refers to a fear that their individual activities result in negative attention from the government that complicates for fellow staff members. Youth educator Pisey shares;

> "I would not really speak out in public or media, to be sure we can still do something for the young people. In the last election, I talked a lot in the public, but this time no." (Interview, Pisey)

Another limitation to individual modes of participation expressed by my interviewees is the risk of being isolated by former partners and companions. This may occur when these partners consider the individual to be 'too dangerous' to be associated with, risking their own or their organizations' safety and freedom of manoeuvre. Arun shares that;

> "There were many NGOs who have been working with me before, they start to disconnect. They start to think that I am too dangerous." (Interview, Arun)

Both of these limitations represent a perceived danger through association that complicates cooperation and connectivity, thus, nurtures tendencies of passivity and isolation. This means that actors that are too vocal in the eyes of the government face the risk of being isolated by others or isolate themselves to ensure continuous activity.

Yet, most commonly, reference to limitations is made in terms of a fear for crackdown, imprisonment, surveillance, and assassination. Frequently, reference is here made to political analyst Kem Ley, who was shot in 2016. This kind of crackdown is discussed in terms of a calculated strategy of intimidation by the government that resonates with a Cambodian saying that Oudom, one of the interviewees, used to illustrate the government intimidation; "They kill one chicken to frighten the other hundred."

This fear of risk and crackdown is further intensified by a discouragement by family members and friends not to engage in political activities, since such are associated with danger. Rathana, a former environmental rights activist whose organization has been shut down by the government and who has therefore initiated individualized engagement, shares his family's concerns;

> "100 per cent they do not support me, because they see me on the news and police around me about to arrest me. So, they call me and ask me, when will you stop?" (Interview, Rathana)

Interviewees frequently associate their parents' fear with a deep-seated Khmer Rouge trauma. According to a number of interviewees, parents discourage their children to engage in any form of political activity as a result of their traumatic experiences during the genocide. Interviewee Kun Thea, who comments on the political situation in the media besides her work in a women's rights NGO, shares that her parents discourage her to even talk about politics.

> "Even when I just talk about politics, they say, come on, it's not your business, don't care about that, politicians do their work and we just do our own business, go to work, get a salary." (Interview, Kun Thea)

A reoccurring theme in the data is that critical thinking is discouraged, by parents as well as by the government and the education system. Kun Thea believes that the mentality that people adapted during the Khmer Rouge era—to "plant a mute tree, don't care about others, just keep it in mute", as she puts it—is still ingrained in people and affects the likelihood to which they engage in politics. Nonetheless, the vast majority of interviewees stressed that they belonged to a generation that was capable of breaking these chains of trauma-induced passivity. People that are born after 1979, and thereby did not fall victim of the Khmer Rouge, are more inclined to question and raise their voices. Thus, the existing literature's focus on associational passivity that has its root in a persistent Khmer Rouge trauma (Coventry, 2016; Frewer, 2013) is certainly relevant for an analysis of Cambodian civil society. However, for the new generation of young leaders and civil society actors, the Khmer Rouge legacy is considered less paralyzing when it comes to their political participation. Nhean, a prominent youth activist focusing on environmental protection and rights violations associated with land grabbing, sees hope in his generation;

> "We are less afraid and participate more, we don't feel so much of the intimidation. I believe that my young generation and the next is the key generation for change." (Interview, Nhean)

Nhean, as well as most of the other interviewees, considers himself part of a new generation that is capable of initiating change since they are 'less afraid' and 'participate more'. For attempting to verify the young generations' capacities, reference is commonly made to an active youth raising their voices to claim change in the 2013 election (Norén-Nilsson, 2017b). In fact, the empirical data shows that individual youth actors, while discussing their individual engagement, do so in relation to a greater unit, to a movement of individual youth activists that autonomously from each other work towards a bigger, common cause. Thus, while participation is organized individually, the data displays a clear sense of connectivity and a sentiment of companionship among youths. Individual LGBTI and political rights activist Arun explains that organizing his participation in this way makes it more difficult for the government to control him, yet, also exposes him to additional risk. According to Arun, the government is frustrated with individual youth activists such as himself;

> "Of course they can shoot me, they can arrest me, but they cannot destroy the movement. Because they don't know who the others are. [...] They can arrest the person, but they cannot arrest the spirit of change. The change still exists." (Interview, Arun)

Thus, interviewees generally talk about 'we' and 'us' despite them occupying individual modes of participation. There is a clear awareness of and reference to the risks that individual activism brings, yet, one person being targeted by the government is depicted as negligible in the bigger scheme of things, the 'movement', and what is often described in terms of a common 'spirit of change'. The need for a 'new approach' is a pattern that was discussed in section 5.2.1. For individual modes of participation that harmonize with government interests, the data displays a tendency in which adaptation to the oppressive regime requirements is chosen as a strategy to deal with increasing risk. However, for this second category—individual government agenda-deviant participation—three diverse strategies can be unearthed in the data. Firstly, interviewees describe a need to become less provocative in their participation and to bridge this current period of shrinking political space through individual capacity building and active citizenship. Peace and reconciliation as well as social media activist Oudom urges others to be patient and build individual capacity during this period of increased restrictions.

> "There are many young people and friends that ask me what can we do in the current situation? I say, just improve yourself and then one day we will have more space to do all that." (Interview, Kun Thea)

Similarly, Kun Thea expresses an urgency "to still believe that we have a chance to change" during this period of silent individual capacity building. Thus, there is a strong belief in the

temporality of the state of oppression and augmented risk that civil society actors are facing. Through self-improvement, change will be feasible as soon as the fog of oppression clears.

Secondly, as a result of narrowing physical space for participation in recent years, interviewees overwhelmingly choose to occupy online space to develop new modes of participation instead. However, even access to online space is increasingly controlled given the governments' recent monitoring of social media expressions. Still, interviewees consider online space to be safer and more flexible, thus, a potential and sustainable strategy for participation. Oudom continues;

> "Now we are completely in the cage, but we are trying to find a way out. What the best way is, we haven't found it yet. So far, online space is the best, and it's a long term one."

Thirdly, the most frequently mentioned 'new strategy' that emerge in the empirical data is a willingness to take calculated risks and "just keep walking", Arun shares. He continues in a way that resonates with his above statement about a 'spirit of change';

> "Let them arrest, we cannot stop them even if we want to, how? We have no guns, only human rights (laughs), so we have to keep going. The strategy that we have is just to move on." (Interview, Arun)

Arun's statement displays a perceived powerlessness when it comes to challenging government practices. Instead of putting focus on infringing on what are considered misconducts of the state apparatus, the strategy is to continue to walk a separate, government-agenda deviant path. Similarly, gender norms critic Mealea problematizes tendencies of risk-induced self-censorship that are noticeable in Cambodian civil society. According to her, the risk must be taken in order for the opportunity of change not to disappear over the horizon. She argues;

> "The only way is to decide to go on, and then you can have hope that the situation will change. If you take the risk, there is hope that there will be change. Don't intimidate yourself into hiding, because then it is getting worse." (Interview, Mealea)

In summary, in this second sphere of the matrix, individual actors whose activities contradict official government interests are situated. While their modes of participation are organized individually, they place themselves in a broader 'movement', a bigger unit of companionship that seems to operate towards a common cause. The empirical data is permeated by reference to risk, fear and a pressure to be passive. Thus, these actors' access to political resources is significantly restricted and a new strategy is needed to escape the 'cage' that toady's civic space is depicted as. The strategies vary from silent self-improvement, shifting to the digital world, and taking calculated risks. What they all have in common is a sense of optimism about their capacity to one day being able to exit the cage.

5.3 Collective modes of participation

Section 5.3 of the analysis focuses on collective modes of participation that the research subjects declared to participate in. These are either in harmony with government interests (5.3.1) or deviate from the government agenda (5.3.2). Jayasuriya and Rodan argue that modes of participation that are made available in Southeast Asia have favoured individual participation and have in fact "militated against the organization and mobilization of collective actors (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:773)". Thus, collective modes of participation are narrowing, leading to an exclusion of collective forms of participation in the struggle for political resources. These tendencies are noticeable in our empirical data, in which interviewees experience difficulties to assemble, mobilize and organize, thus, searching for new modes through which participation is still feasible.

5.3.1 Government-agenda conformity

This section of the research focuses on the bottom-left section of the matrix, namely collective modes of participation that correspond with official government interests. Jayasuriya and Rodan characterize what we here call collective government-agenda conformity as "state-invited spaces" for participation. They argue that the boundaries of these spaces—meaning "who can participate and over what issues" (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:783) are determined by the government. These spaces are spheres of political co-option, yet, Jayasuriya and Rodan do claim that they provide participants with opportunities to affect public policy. In the empirical data collected for this thesis, themes emerge that indicate that the government seeks cooperation and offers the partnership that is being denied for actors that challenge government interests. Interviewees perceive that space for participation exists as long as their choice of wording is non-confrontational, and authorities are approached to build trust. In addition, what becomes evident in the data is the critical youth's anxiety about the increasing success of the government to de-politicise young people. There have not been any interviews conducted with young people that take part in government-sponsored events. Instead, this group of young people is analysed along the lines with my interviewees' remarks about the role they play in Cambodian civil society today.

As was discussed briefly in section 5.2.2, it is a general assumption among my interviewees that their generation has the capacity to change Cambodia for the better. This assumption is accompanied by sentiments of optimism in the data and a sense of purpose that will guide them through this period of narrowing political space. Interviewees most frequently anchor this optimism and hope in the knowledge that Cambodia is a demographically young country and

that in sheer numbers alone, the educated and open new generation of critical youth soon will have the power to take over. Also—and this was introduced above—the generation of youth that is born after 1979 is considered to be free from traumatic constraints and more likely to speak out against oppression. However, one third of the youth actors that were interviewed for this research also shared their concerns about a growing 'movement' of pro-government youths. Samay, a young NGO staff member focusing on anti-corruption says;

> "It is a big youth movement, they try to mobilize and engage youth. They create events, cultural, entertaining, to make youth feel like, we love the country, we care about the country, but they really draw the youths' attention from politics. Join us, promote our culture, promote our customs, bla bla bla." (Interview, Samay)

They—meaning the government—are frequently argued to have comprehended the power of youth for the future of the country, thus, initiating mechanisms that de-politicise potential contesters to the government's power. This is done by inviting young people into government-approved modes of participation that focus on a-political, cultural mobilization. Thus, the Cambodian youth is provided with state-invited spaces for engagement (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:783) within a civil society that otherwise is characterized by lack of space and restrictions on assembly and mobilization. As Samay describes in the above statement, attention is deliberately redirected away from politics. Instead, focus is given to government-defined conflict, thus, these state-invited spaces for participation undermine the possibility to address and represent conflict that is defined outside of the realm of the government (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:784).

Another variant of what Jayasuriya and Rodan termed state-invited spaces for participation that emerged in the data is local authority and ministry-level cooperation. NGO staff members describe their cooperative relation to individual ministry officers that show sincere interest in their work and in the development of the country. Samay explains;

> "Some ministry offices want to improve, they want to work, but they also work under government constraints. If it is too critical, they have to be careful. But the government needs to improve services to the people, so if they see it as a benefit, they will open the space to cooperate, but if it can threaten their political interest, they will close the space." (Interview, Samay)

According to Jayasuriya and Rodan, this form of collaboration is a means to align NGO objectives with government interests. It focuses on the NGOs' capacities to contribute to government-defined 'problem solving' (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:784) rather than strengthening NGOs in defining their own agenda. Moreover, it is here argued that the thesis'

empirical data points to an additional function of these state-invited spaces for cooperation. As evident in Samay's statement above, ministry-level and local authority cooperation seem to function as a control mechanism for detecting government-agenda divergent practices and ambitions, that, when discovered, result in a deprivation of NGOs' access to space to operate within. However, cooperation is described as possible, provided that confrontational wording is avoided, and authorities are invited into organizations' operational space to build mutual trust. Discussion forum organizer Chann informs me about his adaption to government-approved wording when planning his presentations;

> "One of my slides is called "political change". And the government said, why do you say political change, what do you mean? So, I changed to "political development", but everything was the same, content, everything that I said... So, they say ok, that's fine."
> (Interview, Chann)

By conforming to accepted, non-confrontational wording, participation is granted, and spaces are made available. Chann explains that while 'change' is provocative, "development can be positive" in the eyes of the government. Chann also conveys that efforts of building mutual trust with state authorities is greatly appreciated and can lead to a widening of available spaces for participation. In addition, building trust is crucial for creating opportunities to inform the government about outside perspectives, to 'make these people understand', as Chann puts it;

> "We invite government people to talk, we integrate them, and build trust with them, and sometimes we challenge a little bit. Try to make these people understand is better than to isolate them and ignore them. That would be a big problem. Because at the end of the day, they control the gun, they control the money, they control everything." (Interview, Chann)

Thus, in this sphere of civil society, building ties with government representatives is considered a necessary means for gaining access to political resources and for being able to manoeuvre in the government-defined political space. Chann, as well as other interviewees that occupy this third sphere of the matrix—display signs of recognition of the power that the government has over the allocation of these political resources. In order to—at least to some extent—allow inclusion into civic space, the rules that the government dictates have to be respected and played along to, since they 'control everything'. That resonates with the common assumption made by scholars discussing Cambodia's NGO sector. Tim Frewer argues that Cambodia's NGOs are embedded in a system of hierarchical dependency and are therefore reproducing suppressive power dynamics rather than contributing to resolve them (Frewer, 2013). However, Frewer does not take into account that actors may abide by government rules with the ambition of eventually 'making them understand', as Chann frames it. Reaching out to the government is

by some actors considered a more efficient strategy than isolating one's activity, as it enables actors to direct mild criticism towards the government. Thereby, government-conform participation partly has to be understood in light of a diminishing of alternative modes of participation.

In summary, this third sphere of the matrix shows clear signs of politically co-opted spaces, or "state-invited spaces" for participation. Within these spaces, participation is de-politicised and redirected into government-preferred modes that hamstring possibilities for civic contestation of state power. By allowing for actors to forge cooperation and trust, control mechanisms are instigated that allow for the government to monitor deviant activities and force further adaption to government-approved modes of participation, a mechanism that may contribute to reproducing government dictated power dynamics.

5.3.2 Government-agenda deviance

According to Jayasuriya and Rodan, the site of participation that constitutes the last section of the matrix—collective government agenda deviant modes of participation—differs from the previous sphere in that its boundaries no longer solely are defined by the state. Instead, boundaries are more flexible and confined by collective actors. Thus, these political spaces are understood as created independently of state control through collective action and movements (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:785). Jayasuriya and Rodan also write that while these created modes of participation are to be understood as carved out independently from state control, they are very much reliant upon linkages to the government's support functions in order to ensure political success. Hence, "[...] political elites have often sought to subdue social movements and restrict their potential precisely by ensuring these linkages are not formed (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:787)". In what follows, collective engagement is analysed by looking at the opportunities that our interviewees see in the work they conduct within their organizations. Also, it is analysed in what ways the government restricts the cooperation that is needed for these collective activities to gain political success. As we will see below, mobilization is strongly restricted, and interviewees problematize the government-imposed restrictions that render government-agenda deviant organizations involuntarily passive. As was true for individual government-agenda deviant modes of participation, the data is permeated by themes such as 'risks', 'limitations', 'government pressure' and 'enemy'.

As is described in the review of existing literature, the government has been enacting a number of new laws that aim to control civic engagement and decrease autonomy of civil society organizations. These include among others a new law on telecommunications, the Law on

NGOs and Associations and most recently, the lèse majesté law that criminalizes insults to the monarchy (Coventry, 2016; Soeung, 2016). These new restrictions to Cambodians' freedom of speech and assembly are noticeable worries throughout the parts of the data in which government interests are challenged, yet, most commonly in relation to collective participation. Women's rights worker Kun Thea says that;

> "In 2013 and 2014 we really enjoyed what we are doing. But just within a year, everything changed really fast. We never imagined that our government would use these tactics." (Interview, Kun Thea)

Most commonly, this sudden increase in restrictions is made sense of by referring to the government's fear to lose power to a growing mass of people that is aware of their rights and starts claiming them, which the government is "not happy about", as Kun Thea argues. Similarly, Julia, who is working with youth empowerment, explains that her work has become increasingly time consuming after the law was introduced;

> "It's a lot of bureaucracy. Like… 'we cannot accept this letter because the date is not on the right side'... So, it takes a lot of time... And then you never hear anything and you follow up follow up, until you reach someone who says... 'Sorry, but of course we couldn't accept it, the date was wrong, or the space was wrong, I am so sorry' (laughs)." (Interview, Kun Thea)

Thus, by imposing extensive bureaucratic requirements, the work and resources of NGOs is involuntarily shifted from the issue matter to administrative matters. Interviewees express a frustration about the time that has to be distributed to such seemingly insignificant tasks—and as Julia's statement above shows, they are almost laughable in their fruitlessness. While the above statement and the data in general indicate that the NGO Law certainly is a means to occupy critical voices with administrative Sisyphean tasks, it also implies a strong denial of collaboration. This resonates with Jayasuriya and Rodan's claim that powerful elites often restrict opportunities for collective actors to take advantage of state support functions as a way of dampening the potential of a critical social movement (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:787). Interestingly, such administrative requirements were not addressed when conversing with government-agenda compliant groups and NGOs.

Interviewees also frequently pinpoint a fear to assemble that stems from recent increase in government crackdown on public meetings that include more than four participants. In the sequences of the data that discusses this constrained right to assembly, the familiar theme of 'enemy status' reoccurs. Interviewees argue that whenever meetings are held publicly, they face

the risk of being labelled members of the so-called colour revolution, meaning members of a conspiracy to overthrow the government. Environmental rights NGO staff Rathana confirms;

> "The grassroots people are still really afraid to gather publicly, and even if they gather, only a few hours later the authorities come and shuts it down, saying it is illegal and we haven't informed them. But if we inform them, 100 per cent they will say no." (Interview, Rathana)

Interviewees suggest that the government uses reasons such as traffic jams or public order disturbance for denying NGOs and provincial groups the right to assembly. Public protest has become unimaginable for highlighting issues that do not harmonize with government interests. The mention of 'protest' in the data overwhelmingly overlaps with reference to jail, fear, illegal, and police. Sokha, a leader in one of Cambodia's most prominent youth organizations explains;

> "Protest would not be possible... The Prime Minister said that he can kill 200 if people threaten the country's peace and stability. So, the message became clear that we need to be careful. It was very cruel language... How can you say these kinds of words, to kill your own people? For stability (laughs)." (Interview, Sokha)

Thus, assembly and protest is criminalized for issues that according to the Prime Minister pose a threat to the country's peace and stability. This is a clear indication to the ways in which Cambodian political space is organized and who is allowed access to political resources (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:775). It indicates that Cambodia's peace and security is considered threatened by groups and people that display inconsistencies with the government agenda. The Cambodian government has thereby not made political protest legitimately available to government critics, which gives insight into the government's efforts of limiting possibilities for contestation of power (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:774). Another interesting aspect to the above statement is the way in which Sokha wonders about the 'cruel' terminology that the Prime Minister uses when talking about his 'own people'. Sokha positions himself simply as a citizen—making no reference to his political views—belonging to a cultural unity, a community, that should grant its members protection rather than consider them causing instability. This also ties into the reoccurring sentiments of confusions about what is 'right' and 'wrong', that interviewees display when talking about their difficulties to operate in civil society. Arun pinpoints his exclusion from civic space by wondering;

> "We are trying to protect human rights, we are trying to protect the justice system, but what is our mistake? What is wrong?" (Interview, Arun)

While there in fact is a sense of anxiety associated with the narrowing of previously available modes of participation, other interviewees display optimism about an upcoming generational

shift that will lead to a natural transition of power. There is an assumed discrepancy between what is considered a young society and an old leadership. For Arun, the Khmer Rouge generation of leaders will be unable to hold their grip on power for much longer;

> "They are too old to run. I can run one kilometre without exhaustion, but they will be exhausted, right (laughs)? So, I think the change is natural change because the current leaders are too old, and the young leaders grow with open eyes and ears." (Interview, Arun)

While scholars frequently predicted that the power of the Cambodian youth would become evident in the 2018 election (Soeung, 2016; Sullivan, 2016; Un, 2011)—a prediction that was disturbed by increasing oppression—the majority of interviewees maintain their belief in their generations' capacity for initiating change. The data displays a strong belief in the power of youth. Even though the space for political participation is narrow, and sometimes described as non-existent, the Cambodian youth overwhelmingly believes that change is still possible, and that space will open up again. Youth empowerment leader Pisey calls for patience and a long-term vision that should guide civic engagement;

> "We need to be doing something for the future, not for now. We don't fight for the immediate result, we fight so that other generations will take a new step and continue to fight. Until one day, there is no more oppressed, no more oppressor. It's a free world, where people can interact and disagree." (Interview, Pisey)

The increasing restrictions and criminalization of engagement results in an involuntary passivity for government-agenda deviant groups that—again—calls for a 'new strategy'. As was discussed in section 5.2.2, entering the digital space is also here considered a default solution to the diminishing physical space. Still, the lack of opportunities to mobilize and organize collectively is a problem that is considered too severe to be addressed by merely relocating into the realm of social media. In addition to a movement from the physical to the digital space, the data also reveals a relocation from the bottom right sphere of the matrix to individual government-agenda deviant modes of participation, as well as to both spheres of government-agenda conformity. Interviewees either report that they complement the perceived insufficiency of their collective engagement with individual civic expressions, or attempt to adapt to the diminishing space by trying to fulfil government requirements through which they can gain access to modes of participation that they are otherwise denied. This adaption is most commonly descibed as a disguise for continuous government-criticism (e.g. by avoiding confrontational terminology). Thus, "the severity of the constraints on collective action [...] fosters recourse (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007:790)" to a variety of different modes and sites of participation. Yet, civil society actors that cross these boundaries narrate their newly adopted

activities as continuously located within the overarching domain of 'civil society', merely seeking out new ways to contribute to the country's development and gain access to political resources. In the figure below, actors' movement within civil society is illustrated;
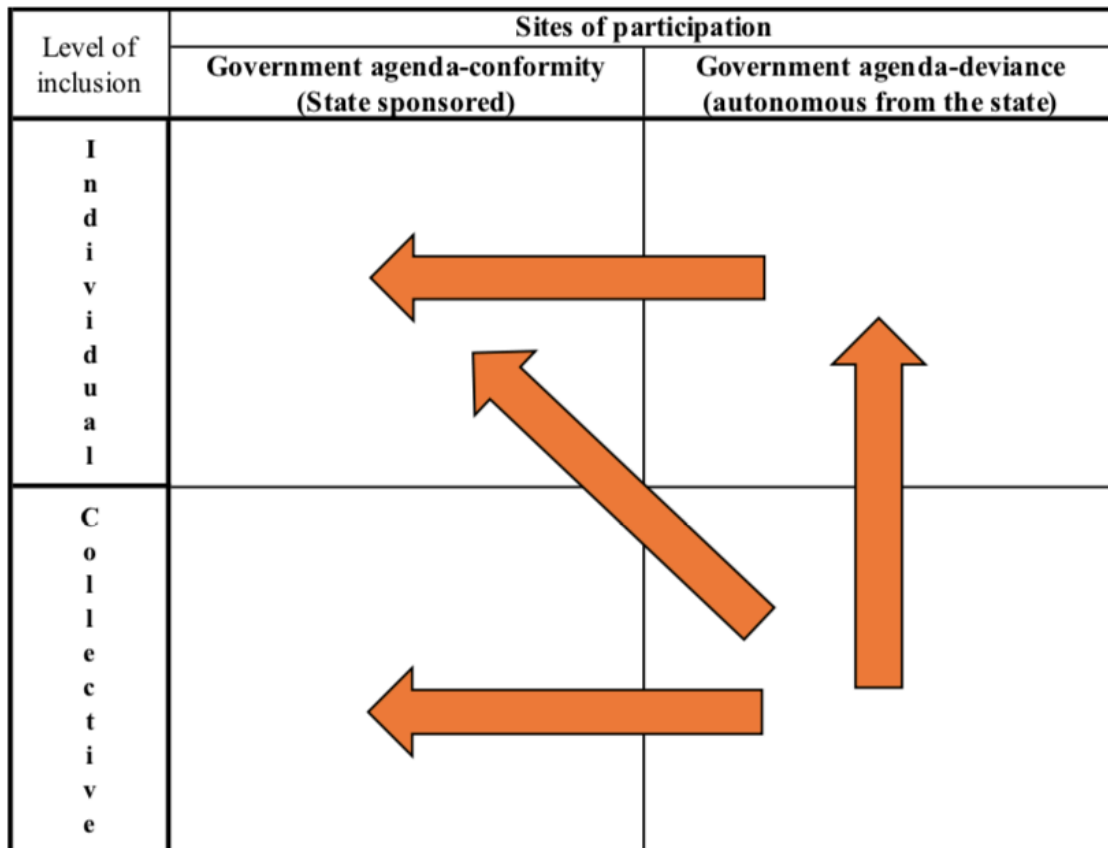
Level of inclusion	Sites of participation	
	Government agenda-conformity (State sponsored)	**Government agenda-deviance (autonomous from the state)**
I n d i v i d u a l		
C o l l e c t i v e		

Figure 3   Source: By author

In summary, the forth and last sphere of the matrix indicates furhter tendencies of exclusion of modes that deviate from official government interests. Firstly, cooperation with government authorities is not granted, which hampers possibilities to organize efficiently. This also becomes evident in the increase in bureaucratic requirements that sway resources and attention away from issues that the government disfavours. Secondly, restrictions are imposed on groups located in this last sphere that are not evident for groups that respect official government interests. Newly enacted laws violate groups' freedom of speech and assembly, thus, limiting opportunities to mobilize, organize and critique collectively. Consequently, assembly, protest and public gathering are illegitimate modes of participation for government-agenda deviant groups and organizations and are therefore inaccessible for them. The data displays that interviewees are relocating to the digital space or to either of the other three spheres in the matrix in an attempt not to be excluded from civic space altogether.

6. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, political elites in Cambodia organize and manage *conflict*—meaning the struggle for political resources—in a way that favours actors whose interests resonate with those of the government, thereby excluding issues, groups and individuals that have the potential of contesting the government's grip on power. While some mechanisms of exclusion are embedded in the Cambodian culture (trauma-induced passivity, avoidance of criticism etc.), the data shows clear evidence of the government actively managing conflict. Thus—answering research question number one—the government makes modes of participation accessible that do not oppose official state interests and thereby do not pose a threat to the government's power. This is done by, firstly, sponsoring government-preferred modes and granting cooperation to those who comply, and secondly, by excluding and marginalizing ill-favoured modes of participation through bureaucratic requirements, new laws and regulations, threats, and a denial of cooperation. This results in—and this answers research question number two—civil society actors searching for new modes that enable continuous participation in times of narrowing space in the 2018 post-election era. Through these newly occupied modes, youth actors aim to secure at least some extent of access to political resources by crossing the boundaries of Jayasuriya and Rodan's (2007) matrix. Crossing these boundaries is a necessity for avoiding complete exclusion. Additional 'new strategies' involve silent self-improvement, a recourse to the digital space, avoiding critical wording as a disguise for continuous criticism and taking calculated risks. Nonetheless, despite being denied access to collective, formal and physical modes of participation, interviewees continue to identify as civil society actors. This identification takes place independently from the sphere of the matrix they operate within and whether they are considered friends or enemies of the state. This re-conceptualization of what constitutes civil society is a crucial matter of access to political resources.

Hence, the case of Cambodia is insufficiently served by the common, narrow understanding of what constitutes 'civil society' (Alagappa, 2004; Coventry, 2016; Ou & Kim, 2014). The scope of civil society cannot be limited to sheer collective participation that occurs autonomously from the state (Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007) or as exclusively referring to Cambodia's vast NGO sector (Coventry, 2016; Frewer, 2013). Also, the common depiction of Cambodian civil society as weak, co-opted and lacking a voice, being an 'uneasy concept' for Cambodia (Coventry, 2016; Un, 2006), is simplistic and inaccurate. Instead, the current silence has to be considered in reference to the government's successfully deployed mechanisms of exclusion that deny actors access to political resources. And while the ability to collectively contest state power is

certainly infringed on through the government's use of violence and intimidation, youth actors continue their struggle for access by occupying and carving out new modes of participation. This struggle is guided by an overwhelming optimism for the future that rather contradicts scholars' sentiments going forward (Soeung, 2016; Sullivan, 2016; Un, 2011). This youth optimism stems from actors continuing to identify as 'we', as members of a greater movement engaging for a common cause despite them occupying—sometimes involuntarily—individual modes of participation.

What, then, can the availability or lack of *modes of participation* tell us about the 2018 post-election regime? Interestingly, youth actors in Cambodia have adopted an understanding of civil society that, while on the one hand confrontational in relation to the state—thus characteristic of illiberal regimes—on the other hand displays a longing for cooperation and mutual dependency—as characteristic for democratic regimes (Alagappa, 2004). This means that, while the government may be successful in denying civil society youth actors the opportunity to contest state power, youth actors do not seem to consider this their ultimate goal. Instead, the struggle for access to political resources is a means to enable civil society to finally fulfil its role as the 'mirror' and 'watchdog' of the government and contribute to the country's development. The government's efforts to exclude critical voices and modes of participation paint the post-election government in powerful illiberal colours, however, civil society—while temporarily silenced and in search for new strategies to engage and claim rights—is strong in its efforts to advocate for their urge for liberal procedures. Thus, the current government can be classified as undemocratic in that fundamental rights are significantly violated, and criticism is an unavailable mode of participation. Yet, it is also a regime whose people continue to optimistically claim rights and renegotiate the space that is at their disposal.

The above analysis invites futher investigation of the fraction of youth that participates in government-invited spaces (what my interviewees call 'state-co-opted youth'), including CPP youth and its motivations for their participation. This can give insight into the government's successful mechanisms of co-option. In addition, this research indicates that adopting a broader, inclusive, and flexible conceptualization of civil society may give insight that are not achievable through conventional frameworks of analysis. Thus, re-conceptualizing civil society is a worthwile objective for future research even within other regimes.

6.1   Appendices

6.1.1   Interview profiles

	Name	Topic
1.	Arun	LGBTI rights, HIV/Aids rights, Paris Peace Accords
2.	Bophany	Social entrepreneurship, local, small-scale farmer support
3.	Bunheng	Human rights
4.	Chann	Political discussions, employment skills education, IT and entrepreneurship information
5.	Julia	Youth education and capacity building, critical thinking training and encouragement
6.	Kun Thea	Women's rights and gender equality
7.	Mealea	Gender norms education, gender equality
8.	Nhean	Youth education, youth engagement for environmental rights protection
9.	Oudom	Peace and reconciliation education and awareness raising
10.	Pisey	Youth leadership training, youth capacity building
11.	Rathana	Environmental rights activist, focus on land grabbing and land rights violations
12.	Rith	Youth education, employment skills education, IT and entrepreneurship information
13.	Samay	Anti-corruption, transparency
14.	Sokha	Youth education and capacity building, critical thinking training and encouragement
15.	Thomas	Researcher for a Cambodian thinktank that also works with youth education and critical thinking training
16.	Vanna	Researcher for a Cambodian thinktank that also works with youth education and critical thinking training

All names have been changed to protect the interviewees identity. Most of the interviewees are between the ages of 28 and 38 and are thus considered 'youth'. Thomas and Pisey do not belong to the category of 'youth' but are included in this research given their work with organizing and educating youth. Thomas and Julia are international NGO or thinktank staff members that have been working with Cambodian youth for a significant amount of time.

6.1.2 Interview guide

The following set of questions guided the semi-structured interviews. The questions were altered somewhat in accordance to the topics that the interviewees' work with. It was important for this research—given that it is of very sensitive nature—not to intimidate my interviewees with sensitive questions, but rather react on what they chose to share and follow up with questions accordingly. Thus, some interviews deviated from the interview guide to some extent.

◊   Could you tell me what you do? What kind of activities are you involved in?

◊   Could you tell me about your organization?

◊   What topics do you work with?

◊   How long have you been active?

◊   What kind of activities have been especially successful or unsuccessful in the past?

◊   Are you involved in any activities outside your organization?

◊   Do you consider your engagement collective or individual?

◊   What is most important/most effective today?

◊   Why is the work that you do important?

◊   What is your motivation for the work that you do?

◊   Do you consider you provide a service in society?/What do you consider your role is in society?

◊   What is your relation to the government? Do you cooperate in any way? Does the government support what you do?

◊   Do you cooperate with other organizations/other actors/ministries/local authorities/individual government officials?

◊   Do you feel like your organization/you represent the interests of others?

◊   What does 'civil society' (sangkum civil) mean to you?

◊   Would you say that your generation is capable of initiating change?

◊   What is the role of young people today?

◊   Why is it important to work with young people? (for youth organizations)

◊ Has your work changed in any way pre-, during and post-election?

◊ Have the newly introduced laws (NGO law etc.) effected your engagement?

◊ Do you feel there are risks involved with your engagement?

◊ Are there any obstacles or limitations to your engagement?

◊ Are there any activities/projects that you would like to carry out but are unable to?

◊ Do your friends and family support you?

◊ What does their support (lack thereof) mean to you?

6.1.3 List of figures

Figure 1 – Jayasuriya and Rodan's (2007) theoretical framework *modes of participation;*

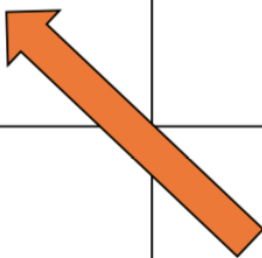| Level of Inclusion	Sites of Participation	
	State and Trans-State Sponsored	*Autonomous from the State*
Individual	**Administrative Incorporation** • Grievance Processes (Vietnam) • Feedback Unit (Singapore)	**Individualized Political Expression** • Bloggers • Malaysiakini (Malaysia)
Collective	**Societal Incorporation** • Social Investment Fund (Thailand) • Nominated MPs (Singapore) • Urban Poor (Philippines)	**Civil Society Expression** • Labour Union NGOs (Thailand) Groups •

Source: Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007)

Figure 2 – Operationalization of the theory for this thesis encompassing the modes of participation that emerged from the empirical data;

Level of inclusion	Sites of participation	
	Government agenda-conformity (State sponsored)	**Government agenda-deviance (autonomous from the state)**
I n d i v i d u a l	Social entrepreneurs Leadership & employment skills educators Gender/LGBTI activists	Social media activists Political, human and environmental rights educators
C o l l e c t i v e	State-led youth activities Ministry-level cooperation IT, economy, employment skills training platforms	Khmer rouge reconciliation NGOs Critical debate & discussion platforms Youth NGOs Gender/LGBTI NGOs Human rights & environmental protection NGOs

Source: By author

Figure 3 – This figure illustrates the way in which actors move across the boundaries of the different sites of participation to search out new, available modes of participation in the post-election period;

Source: By author

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