

Democracy in Action: Decentralisation in Post-conflict Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

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The process of democratisation in post-conflict Cambodia has been problematic. Almost two decades after the UN-led intervention in 1993, democracy in Cambodia remains shallow, as evidenced by various studies. Three main factors are hindering democratisation: the country's recent violent history, the Khmer political order and the unfinished tasks of the UN-led intervention.

Experiences of other countries illustrate that it is very difficult to consolidate democracy in post-conflict societies due to internal strife, weak state institutions, historical political transitions and lack of political legitimacy. Hence, this dissertation argues that *decentralisation* may make the consolidation of democracy in post-conflict society possible. If carefully implemented, decentralisation could consolidate democracy in Cambodia, especially at the local level.

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the quality of democratic decentralisation reform in Cambodia. The focus is ultimately justified by the frequent arguments that democratic decentralisation is vital in deepening democracy in a post-conflict context. The main research problem is: *what is the quality of democratic decentralisation reform in post-conflict Cambodia?* Democratic decentralisation in Cambodia is analysed through the empirical investigation of three concepts: *responsiveness*, *accountability* and *devolution of power* of the elected commune councils.

Findings suggest that there has been an improvement in the quality of local governance with the democratic decentralisation reform. Democratic decentralisation reform has influenced democratisation and reconstruction of post-conflict Cambodia, including creating political space and reinventing local democratic institutions, reconnecting the central and local government, building political legitimacy, serving as democratic education for local leaders, changing political culture and leading to other reforms.