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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Conflict and Elite Formation in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia

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Abstract

The article focuses on a comparative analysis of conflict and elite formation in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia; it argues that societal conflicts in Southeast Asia are grounded in the historical formation of elite social structures within differing sociocultures and that major and long-lasting societal conflicts—both violent and nonviolent—occur in social spaces between 'power elite' groups. Additionally, it shows how up-and-coming elite groups are recruited from the fringes of the old hierarchy, which is why they are—in many respects—social hybrids of old and new sociocultures. Moreover, after those new arrivals were elevated into the 'power elite', the window for upward mobility rapidly re-closed.

Keywords: elite; conflict; Thailand; Laos; Cambodia

This article asks what role the social structures of dominant classes play in explaining societal conflict and proposes a theoretical framework to conceptualise this structure and its evolution. Conflict studies lack a theoretical perspective on elites, political history and social structures more broadly (Bultmann 2018b, 2020). Many previous studies treated dominant classes as uniform and one-directional patrimonial pyramids without inner stratification or focus on lower segments of society to explain conflicts without placing them into a larger social structure. In contrast, this article presents an analysis of societal conflicts—both violent and nonviolent—that is grounded in the political history of dominant classes' socio-structural divisions. It thus maintains that conflict studies, the sociology of elites and area studies focused on Southeast Asia may benefit from theoretical cross-pollination. At the same time, it posits that a comparative perspective that puts developments in one country into perspective seems vital, thereby clarifying what is specific to the case in question and how it differs compared to other nations.

The main thesis is that conflicts can be explained as products of divisions among social groups in the dominant class with roots in different sociocultures, which are social structures and forms of hierarchisation that have survived over time (Houben and Rehbein 2011). This article will show how each elite group is formed in a distinct socioculture that values resources and social backgrounds differently. Following and adapting Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework (Bourdieu 1986, 2010), it maintains that sociocultures change the valuations of capital in ways that lead to the inclusion of new segments of society in the dominant class. However, these new segments do not emerge at random; they are recruited from the fringes of the dominant class, meaning that they are socially close to those who are already elite. In other words, they are part of their patrimonial network in the state apparatus but are not yet members of the dominant class. This approach resembles Hans-Dieter Evers' concept of 'strategic groups' that 'tend to emerge whenever new resources become available for appropriation or distribution' (Evers and Benedikter 2009: 4; for details see Evers and Gerke 2009).

The core argument is that groups enter the dominant class during times of change among sociocultures. These transformations in institutions and valuations provide new principles of hierarchisation, which result in new entry routes into the political field and ruling apparatus. However, those who

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enter the dominant class in times of social change are precisely those whom the new order values. The point is that each socioculture promotes new groups that fit its symbolic hierarchy and specific institutions of power: e.g., the aristocracy under precolonial patrimonialism, Western-educated intellectuals in colonial administrations, members of the early revolutionary forces and party cadres under socialism and entrepreneurs in capitalism. For the most part, these people are recruited from very specific, small groups that are socially located close to the old order's inner circles; new members are often directly and personally promoted by members of the old order. Thus, the up-and-coming elite groups are often social hybrids of the old order and its peripheries, as the new order is typically dependent—at least initially—on the old one's personnel (e.g., as colonialism was dependent on the aristocracy).

This mechanism changes when transformations take the form of violent revolutions. However, even drastic upheavals that alter the dominant class's composition (e.g., genocide and foreign occupation in Cambodia) only lead to a short-term opening in the ruling segment of society. The new elite group is recruited from a very specific social and symbolic position defined by the specific socioculture (in Cambodia's case, Khmer Rouge defectors). After this group was lifted into the dominant class, the window for upward mobility into the highest level of society closed again. This is also obvious for less drastic changes (e.g., 'commoner intellectuals' who staff the newly created state apparatus in Thailand). Dominant classes strongly tend towards closing ranks and organising power through patrimonialism and kinship relations. Even when new elites emerge, old members of the dominant class try to keep them away from new resources and continue to occupy positions and maintain access to the highest levels of society. They also try to incorporate new elites through intermarriage and patrimonial inclusion (e.g., the newly rich under capitalism marrying into the political elite).

This article analyses the similarities and differences in elite formation and conflict in three countries: Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. These nations share a common sociocultural tradition and have experienced similar (external) pressures and patterns of social change. However, they differ in distinct ways, which makes them interesting as comparative cases. Thailand was never colonised and has maintained a notably stable pre- and semi-colonial elite structure. Cambodia experienced civil and anti-colonial wars, genocide and foreign occupation. It also underwent one of the most drastic ruptures in elite composition ever witnessed with the elimination of the ruling elite under the Khmer Rouge and the flight of survivors into a diaspora or across the border. This caused a division within Cambodia's power dynamics. While Laos experienced events and changes in socioculture that were very similar to Cambodia's, its small and heavily interrelated dominant class has remained comparatively peaceful.

In contrast to previous analyses (Croissant 2018; Scott 2017), this article does not focus primarily on the formation and functioning of social power in Southeast Asia. Its goal is to complement previous research by establishing a theoretical framework on how to conceptualise 1) the social structure of dominant classes, 2) different pathways of its reproduction and formation and 3) the role of violence in explaining variances in its composition. This comparison uses three countries with similar precolonial socio-political structures to detect differences in elite formation and conflict that lead to variations in the composition of the countries' 'power elites'. This paper is not an exhaustive discussion of country-specific socio-political histories—which is clearly beyond the scope of a journal article—but a comparative perspective on the impact of different modes of sociocultural and violent transformations on the stratification of dominant classes.

This article proceeds as follows: Section 1 introduces the theoretical approach and concepts. Section 2 discusses the formation of the dominant class and conflict in Thailand. Section 3 looks at Laos, while Section 4 deals with Cambodia. Each case emphasises different periods and aspects. For example, the precolonial socioculture section will be more detailed for Thailand because its dominant class from precolonial times has endured much more strongly than that of Laos and Cambodia; this approach reduces repetition. For instance, the section on Cambodia focuses more on recent developments and lines of conflict that are less well known in the literature.

Theoretical Approach and Concepts

This article examines the structure of ruling elites in mainland Southeast Asia as a result not only of the accumulation of economic capital but also of social inequities that have led to the formation and

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endurance of different groups within the dominant class. This article uses a slightly amended form of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts. It thus maintains that the distribution and valuation of certain forms of cultural, social and symbolic capital—i.e., resources—are equally important for the formation and endurance of elite groups (Bourdieu 1986, 2010). Cultural capital refers to education, certificates and distinctive forms of behaviour, while social capital pertains to connections to influential people and networks. Symbolic capital points to a meta-valuation of these types of capital, often in the form of institutional weight given to people or in the form of capital at their disposal. For instance, the symbolic value of having fought in a resistance movement changes over time and can acquire a distinctive value in political institutions. This article shows how access to dominant class positions is not the result of competition among equals. Instead, under stable conditions, access is reproduced across generations by monopolising and passing on acquired capital through one's extended family and network in the dominant class.

This passing on of capital constitutes *social groups* within the elite—'a tradition line which reproduces itself from one generation to the next by passing on relevant capital and habitus traits, as well as symbolically distinguishing itself from other classes' (Sirima *et al.* 2020: 500). Tradition lines can be interpreted in terms of kinship ties as well as patrimonial networks that extend beyond kinship. Members of the dominant class promote those who are close to them not only as kin but also as individuals from a similar social background because pre-existing members of the dominant class want people like them in the dominant class. In such a class, social groups have a common culture and similar sets of capital at their disposal; they are not limited to individuals and may comprise extended families and social networks across generations. In addition, they sometimes restrict mobility from other tradition lines into their ranks. While social mobility into a dominant class is highly limited in normal times, changes in sociocultures can lead to a re-evaluation of capital and to changes in the institutionalisation of societal hierarchies—the main thesis of this article. *Socioculture* refers to principles of hierarchisation and structuration that may endure and coexist with later structures across generations by incorporating symbolic valuations, hierarchies and stratifications, and through institutional residues (Baumann and Bultmann 2020; Houben and Rehbein 2011; Jodhka *et al.* 2017; Rehbein 2007). For instance, a royal court may incorporate principles of later sociocultures (e.g., capitalism), thus adapting its socioculture while still claiming the symbolic superiority of royal principles and retaining institutions as residues of the past (e.g., a royal court in a constitutional monarchy).

Drawing from and adapting Bourdieu's work, the power of certain sets of capital to enable access to institutions, positions, resources and activities within the elite can be seen as changing over time between sociocultures. For example, the transition from precolonial to colonial sociocultures in Southeast Asia initiated changes in the valuation of certain resources and the establishment of institutions (e.g., schools for higher and Western education). This transition also led to changes in the routes of access to the dominant class. However, while these changes among sociocultures may open pathways into the dominant class and fill new institutions, these access routes close relatively quickly. Hence, newcomers soon monopolise the institutions of elite recruitment and, in effect, establish a new heritage.

Furthermore, up-and-coming elite groups in a new sociocultural order are often initially prevented from entering the dominant class, as older members still control decisive institutions and set relevant political frameworks. This produces frustration among emerging elites and often triggers violent conflicts or at least changes in the setup of the political field through force (e.g., coups or transformations from absolute to constitutional monarchies). The opening of a dominant class to newcomer groups is usually the product of force or even violence, as old members are unwilling to cede privileges to newcomers. While each elite section is distinctive and has a specific tradition line rooted in a particular socioculture, the tendency to merge with other groups to form an increasingly unified dominant class, particularly through intermarriage, appears to hinge on the degree of violence that brought the new groups into dominant positions in the first place. This is seen in Cambodia, where intermarriage between certain dominant groups of the pre-Khmer Rouge order and the Hun Sen elite rarely occurs. However, joining the comparatively new capitalist group of entrepreneurs in the country depends on intermarriage or direct forms of institutionalised patrimonial exchanges in an 'elite pact' with the dominant Hun Sen faction. These exchanges allow new members of this class to gain and maintain wealth (Dahles and Verver 2014).

Thus, a dominant class can be defined as a class comprising various social elite groups with roots in different sociocultures that maintain control over the state by monopolising access to cultural capital (e.g.,

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elite schools), social capital (e.g., intermarriage), economic capital, symbolic capital (e.g., valuation within the socioculture), or a combination of capital types. In contrast to established views (Friedman and Laurison 2020; Keller 1991; for a critique, see Bottomore 1993 [1964]), this article treats elites not as individuals with higher-level occupations, but as social groups that are (or were) able to control the state and with it, at least in the cases analysed here, the economy. Therefore, this article uses the term *dominant class* to denote the social reproduction, relative stability and cohesion of this segment of society.

Elite groups are those who are part of, or are on the brink of constituting, a segment of the dominant class. They usually do not work as managers at one company (no matter how large), and they are difficult to study due to academics' lack of access to the higher echelons of society. Managers are the 'concierge class' of the dominant classes (Byrne 2019: 104). Therefore, instead of speaking solely of a specific political elite, the remainder of the article employs C. Wright Mills' (2000 [1956]) concept of 'power elites' to denote ruling groups in politics, the military and business that occupy interlocking positions in the 'field of power' (Bourdieu 1998). This definition focuses not on functional parts of society, as functionalist approaches to elite formation would (e.g., Keller 1991), but on a field of 'power elites' who, especially in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, occupied, currently occupy or wish to occupy as newcomers, all sectors of society through rule and domination.

Regarding Thai, Lao and Cambodian elites, a threefold transition from one socioculture to another can be observed: one section of the old dominant class tries to maintain its positions, privileges and institutions; another one tries to transfer its sets of capital to positions in the new order and occupy new institutions and ranks to maintain its power; a new section rises to the top from a lower social position. For instance, the new socioculture might value Western education or membership in a revolutionary movement. However, in most cases, the new groups within the dominant class—no matter how revolutionary in outlook—come from favourable starting positions that are not structurally far from the previous 'power elites'. Access to higher education in colonial Laos and Cambodia, for example, was originally restricted to royalty and nobility. However, the need to expand colonial state institutions and to have a Western-trained bureaucratic elite eventually enabled children from families at lower levels of the administration to prove themselves under the patronage of old dominant class members or in newly established educational facilities. Moreover, new valuations rested on older ones, as when membership in revolutionary movements was accompanied by a valuation of Western education at the very top (e.g., Khmer Rouge or Pathet Lao intellectuals). This dynamic—and social capital in the 'power elite'—explain why newcomers usually come from the fringes of the old order.

Old 'power elites' may attempt to transfer their capital and institutional positions to a new socioculture (e.g., princes becoming revolutionaries or entrepreneurs), merge with newcomers through intermarriage or develop elite pacts that establish formal or informal patterns of cooperation. However, these strategies have limitations and old elites eventually feel threatened. This leads to conflicts, such as the one in Cambodia between the Hun Sen elite and the new capitalist class personified by Kith Meng or the friction between the Thai court and Thaksin Shinawatra. The following sections compare how 'power elites' are formed, how they pass on their heritage and under what conditions they did so in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Thailand

In precolonial times, the hegemonic elite structure of royal courts in what is now Thailand, Laos and Cambodia was a *mandala*. This term refers to an Indo-Tibetan tradition of enclosed concentric circles (*la*) directed towards a core (*manda*) (Wolters 1982). Within the socioculture of the mandala, power was exercised through patrimonial relations in which superiors gathered as many inferiors as possible to pay tribute and provide labour in exchange for protection and patronage. In many ways, this structure resembled family ties. On political maps, these kingdoms had no clear territorial demarcations, comprising instead a patchwork of overlapping mandalas. Politics were based on personal relationships connecting different kings and courts with princes and underlings rather than being organised within national or ethnic boundaries. In Tai languages, this system is known as a *mueang* (Raendchen and Raendchen 1998), while in Khmer, it could be translated to *srok* (Bultmann 2020: 136). The system was characterised by the fluctuating loyalties of minor entities towards major entities—villages towards towns, towns towards courts and sometimes courts towards a king.

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The Siamese field of power during the nineteenth century comprised royal families, a nobility (open in theory but actually hereditary) and, in the economic sphere, predominantly Chinese or part-Chinese traders who formed a comparatively stable class with little upward mobility (Akin Rabibhadana 1969). Over centuries, regional kingdoms saw different attempts at socio-political integration. The most influential for the Siamese court was the *sakdina* system (Terwiel 2011: 45–50). This was a more integrated mandala system used to separate people according to status and to allocate or withhold privileges. In this system, the dignity of various nobility grades was measured in terms of land. *Sakdina* is a compound word combining *sak-thi* (power in Sanskrit) and *na* (paddy field in Thai), which can be translated as 'land status'. The relative social position of every individual was specified in measures of land called *rai* (1600 square meters). Although this system of land division according to rank disappeared at the end of the Ayutthaya period, a person's value still was determined in rai. A member of the royal family, for example, was worth 100,000 rai. The principle of hierarchisation in this system was centred on the king and value was defined by proximity to him.

A person worth more than 400 rai was part of the dominant class, which comprised only 2000 of the two million people in Ayutthaya. Chroniclers, lowly Brahmans, court jesters (male and female) and lawyers were each worth 50 rai. A married man with his house was worth 20 rai, ordinary men and women 15 and slaves and beggars only five (exact numbers are taken from Terwiel 2011: 45–46). This system was still officially in place during the early Bangkok period, when the population was divided into four legal categories: *chao* (princes), *khunnang* (nobles), *phrai* (commoners) and *that* (slaves). The system made social order a matter of hereditary positions in an estate-based society that separated 'big men' (*phu yai*) at the top and created rather fragmented tradition lines without any shared consciousness of social class. Politics and business were—and still are—usually a matter of patrilineal family networks (*trakun*) comprising highly cohesive and long-lasting tradition lines (Rangsivek 2013).

After the 1855 British–Siamese Bowring Treaty, successive Thai kings implemented reforms to centralise government, Westernise the administration, separate civilians from military offices, abolish the sakdina system (at least officially) and give Siam the shape of a 'modern' nation with territorial delineations (Winichakul 1994). The process of nation-building during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—accompanied by many foreign, particularly British, advisors—saw an expansion of education to fill the ranks of a growing state bureaucracy and military, the creation of a public sphere and the notion of a clearly demarcated and ethnically homogeneous nation. Still recruited largely from the dominant class (the aristocracy), civil servants were trained at the Royal Pages School, a forerunner of Chulalongkorn University, and were often sent abroad to study, while military officers attended the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy. For decades, many, if not most, central figures of the Thai field of power attended one of these schools.

However, the court could not monopolise education and reforms eventually enabled the rise of 'commoner intellectuals' recruited not from all strata of society, but only from a specific one: the sons of lower administrators with *wat* education (Baker and Phongpaichit 2019: 45–47). Increasingly, candidates for higher education institutions— who automatically entered the upper ranks of the bureaucracy and the military after graduation—were recruited not from the wider populace but from the fringes of the court, where talented students enjoyed the patronage of members of the elite. While this semi-colonial process of nation-building enabled a class of commoner intellectuals to enter the bureaucracy and the military, newcomers to the field of power were prevented from rising to top ruling positions, which remained restricted to the royal family and the old nobility. Upward mobility increased for this segment of society but then decreased considerably after a few decades, adding a new hereditary group of intellectuals and military officers to the existing dominant class (Evers 1966: 105). Thus, the partial opening of the 'power elite' to commoners through a semi-colonial socioculture was swiftly followed by closure and consolidation.

However, the new intellectual elite groups became increasingly frustrated with being barred from ruling positions and policymaking under the absolute monarchy. For instance, 'every military officer ranked lieutenant general or above was a member of the royal family' (Baker and Phongpaichit 2019: 67). When the Great Depression struck Siam in 1929, the king reacted by firing large segments of the state administration. Alienated by the privileges and—in their view—incompetence of the aristocracy, a circle of nationalist junior officers and bureaucrats trained in domestic elite schools (and in Europe) staged a

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coup that ended the absolute monarchy. These commoner intellectuals formed a distinctive elite group with common capitals (i.e., a newly established system of education and its cultural capital, as well as social capital in terms of family connections to the court and its administration) that enabled their upward mobility into the field of power. However, with political identities formed in overseas universities—ranging from socialist views to Thai nationalist identities shaped in anti-royal France to European fascism—this new elite group remained in conflict under the recently formed constitutional monarchy. As a result, amongst others, the 'socialist' politician Pridi Banomyong went into temporary exile in France. From 1938 until 1944, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Phibun) took Thailand closer to fascist Japan and attacked ethnic Chinese residents and their trading elites; he also instituted a Thai ethno-nationalist regime, as evidenced by the country's name change from Siam to Thailand. The period of military dictatorship under Phibun laid the groundwork for the military's rise to power (Terwiel 2011: 251–273).

Eventually, the military, the bureaucracy and the royal families forged an elite pact in which the king was restored to his position as a symbol of unity and political detachment and the military was relied on to settle political disputes according to his interests. In the absence of war, massive social upheaval and foreign military intervention, minor challenges to the dominant class—such as the 1970s revolts by students, peasants and workers—brought an end to the decade-long military rule but did not significantly alter the composition of the field of power (Baker and Phongpaichit 2019: 281). The old mueang order remained in place and adapted to a semi-colonial, capitalist socioculture by forging a pact with upcoming elite groups. Yanyongkasemsuk (2007) argued that Thai elites comprise the royal family and the descendants of Chinese traders, along with the bureaucrats, intellectuals and politicians who entered the elite after the constitutional monarchy was established in 1932; this restructuring of the elite created tradition lines that last to this day. The capitalist socioculture shaped Thailand's dominant class as its reproduction is guaranteed through economic capital holdings. However, the dominant class functions like a secluded caste through networking, alliances, intermarriage and close relationships (see also Rangsivek 2013). Connections to the royal family remain important and are still modelled after the sakdina system. Yanyongkasemuk also pointed to continuities in 'power elite' composition before and after 1932, indicating that this political shift did not significantly alter the dominant class; it only added a new segment of commoner intellectuals and military officers from the upper-middle class (see also Steinmetz 2000; Yanyongkasemsuk 2007: 188–192).[1]

The biggest challenge to the Thai dominant class—comprising the old mueang, the military and semi-colonial commoner intellectuals—arose during the 'American era', when the United States (US) lent massive military, financial and geopolitical support to turn Thailand into a strategic regional partner during the Cold War (Baker and Phongpaichit 2019: 139–166). Without major internal conflicts, colonial intervention and disruptions, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1946–2016) managed to retain the royalty's power as the cosmic, social and political centre of the mandala while upholding the pact with a strengthened military (Handley 2006). However, US patronage also contributed to economic and social changes towards a capitalist socioculture, which facilitated the rise of the middle class and the entry of entrepreneurs (predominantly descendants of Chinese business elites) into top levels of the political apparatus, culminating in the government of Thaksin Shinawatra (Jamrik 2006). The conflict between yellow shirts and red shirts over the past two decades mirrors the conflict between the old mueang order, with its rigid inequities, and a new capitalist hierarchy supported by a segment of society that calls for change in how the country is governed. This segment is closer to capitalist principles and attached to billionaire and former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Baker and Phongpaichit (2019: 139) even argue that the 'American era'—with its inflow of troops, military material, capital and capitalist ideology—was more intrusive than semi-colonialism and the 1932 coup, as the 'American era' enabled the rise of an elite group of royalty-business-military-cum-bureaucratic conglomerates. Still, the new 'power elite' in the capitalist socioculture of American-sponsored businesses remained comparatively small and cohesive, forming another separate tradition line:

[1]The events culminating in the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 are of course not caused by rifts in the 'power elite' alone. The perspective developed in this article serves to complement other studies, such as Jory (2021: 96–143), focusing on the politics and habitus formation of various segments of Thai society.

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> Around 30 family groups dominated this era through their privileged access to capital and political favors. They became business conglomerates by diversifying into property, hotels, hospitals, finance, insurance, and other ventures to provide occupations for sons (and sometimes daughters). Leading lights of these families took prominent roles in speech-group and welfare associations. They exchanged marriage partners, crossing old boundaries of clan and dialect. (Baker and Phongpaichit 2019: 152–153)

At the same time, as the moral centre and profiteers under which this process took place, royalty helped instil a capitalist developmental ideology focused on growth, industrialisation and infrastructure expansion. During this transition to a capitalist socioculture, the old hierarchies lived on but were threatened by the 'power elites' created by this change. As a result, Thailand's elite structure—like the country's general social structure (Sirima *et al.* 2020)—has a bifocal hierarchy stemming from two sociocultures. One has tradition lines rooted in the older mueang order and its economic elites, which saw only gradual power shifts and transfers and is exemplified by political trakuns such as the Kittikachorns and the Choonhavans. The other socioculture has a tradition line of American-led capitalism, exemplified by families such as the Shinawatras and Techaphaybuns (Rangsivek 2013: 50–53).

Laos

While the Thai elite can be divided into two tradition lines rooted in the old mueang (with some modifications caused by and responding to colonialism) and a post-Second World War capitalist elite, Laos experienced major changes in regime structures and shifts from precolonial to colonial, socialist and, finally, capitalist sociocultures, each of which was accompanied by a rise in new elite groups with distinct tradition lines. Due to its subjection to French colonialism as a protectorate, the Lao court played a lesser role in the transition to a nation-state than the Thai court. In Laos, colonial intervention created a nation-state that comprised a small hereditary dominant class made up of various principalities from different regions, into which only the upper segments close to the courts or the military were able to rise. This was a tiny patrimonial elite, which, until the late 1950s, consisted of approximately 200 families forming closed tradition lines. Most of them were 'either direct descendants of the old royal families of Champassak, Vientiane, Xieng Khouang, or Luang Prabang, or courtiers who served these kingdoms' (Halpern 1961: 26). As in Thailand, some members of the high nobility were sent abroad to study, in this case to Vietnam or colonial France. However, until the Second World War, 'fewer than a dozen Lao had received the equivalent of a full college education, although a somewhat larger number had studied in France for briefer periods' (ibid.). A small, interrelated aristocracy managed to monopolise government positions and access to education, thereby preventing a rise of 'commoner intellectuals,' as happened in Thailand (Halpern 1964: 64).

The comparatively small and cohesive structure of the 'power elite', with close kinship ties across royal factions, remained an important mitigating factor throughout the years of political turmoil and changes in socioculture. Conflicts reflected competition between the four precolonial courts from different regions; however, access to the courts remained highly limited (Stuart-Fox 1997: 15–20). The newly established colonial administration offered a chance for upward mobility. While most students of the newly established Lycée Pavie in Vientiane had aristocratic family backgrounds, a few were recruited from commoner ranks. Like in Thailand, these few commoner intellectuals came from the fringes of the court and had social capital reaching into the state administration and a comparatively high social status—upper-middle segments of urban society (Rehbein 2007: 101). Like in Thailand, the nation-building process in Laos fostered nationalist factions within the administration. To legitimise their colonial rule, the French taught not only Western technocracy and ideals but also Buddhist studies and the Lao language. Within the colonial socioculture, a public sphere and an ethno-nationalist 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) of 'the Lao' emerged, marginalising the minorities who resided in the hills. However, compared to its neighbours Cambodia and especially Vietnam, colonial rule in Laos was less intrusive, and resistance was limited. During the Second World War, the Japanese supported the Lao Issara movement, of which Prince Pethsarath was a part. However, there were only brief skirmishes between the Issara and the returning French after the war.

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The existing literature highlights how ideological divisions resulting from the influence of new socio-cultures taking shape in Laos are important to understand elite conflicts (Wolfson-Ford 2018). Furthermore, Laos seems to present a case in which family relations mattered in fostering cohesion across sociocultural divisions that persisted into the post-colonial period. In Laos, sociocultural divisions took shape within elite family networks even before the advent of new socialist elite groups. During the period of anti-colonial struggle and the civil war that followed it, all factions were under the leadership of princes who were related, such as the neutralists (Souvanna Phouma), the Communist Pathet Lao (Prince Souphanouvong) and the aforementioned Issara (Prince Pethsarath). All were members of the royal family, had studied in France and had resisted major fighting against factions led by their relatives—much to the annoyance of the Americans, who were trying to install a pro-US regime to help fight the Communists. As Halpern noted:

> In this connection, the reaction of the elite to Prince Souphanouvong is interesting. His leadership of the group opposing the royal government was not condemned in terms of disloyalty to his branch of the royal family or to his elder half-brother the viceroy, but rather because he failed to behave with the decorum expected of a prince and had married a Vietnamese. Following the pattern of the three brother-princes, in no case do families seem to have split because individuals became members of the Pathet Lao. This is not to say that family ties were stronger than politics, but rather that the Lao do not seem to view these as conflicting loyalties. Being a Lao and member of the elite is more important than specific kinship or even political associations. But even these group feelings are not extremely strong or rigid. (Halpern 1961: 30)

Eventually, as highlighted by Baird (2021), ideological rifts intersecting with regional tensions between the House of Champassak, the House of Luang Prabang and the Sananikone family in Vientiane played an important role in the rise and eventual takeover of the Communist Pathet Lao in 1975. Their rise to power emphasises the importance of precolonial elite division into different geographic centres for post-colonial conflicts.

The advent of a new socialist socioculture initially played out as a 'family affair' within the dominant class, which was structured by ideological tensions and a persistence of pre-existing regional divisions that eventually led to the rise of new elite groups. Socialism forced large parts of the dominant class to migrate to the diaspora (with some returning during the 1990s), thus facilitating an unprecedented entry of non-elite members into ruling positions. The individuals entering the dominant class in the socialist socio-culture were those who were valued the most according to socialist principles of hierarchisation and who had been part of a specific social network. Not every cadre was welcomed; only those with a long membership in the party and proven loyalty within its inner circle managed to rise to the top and into the Central Committee. Even today, the socialist 'power elite' in the Central Committee wields power in the state and merges economic power with political domination. In Laos, being powerful means being rich, and vice versa; this has been especially true since the country's capitalist transformation following the major reforms of 1986. Everyone rising in influence and economic power as an entrepreneur must be part of the patrimonial exchange with the established power elite and be a member of the state party. Conversely, 'power elites' secure access to lucrative resources and state licenses not through capitalist entrepreneurship but via political domination.

Today, a smaller segment of Laotian elites can be traced back to the patrimonial elites of French rule, especially if they have connections to leading party cadres like Khamtay Siphandone. This is the case of Sinouk, the son of Sisombat, for example, who was a colonial-era entrepreneur exiled in 1975, but who had connections to Khamtay Siphandone. After returning in the 1990s, Sinouk established a lucrative coffee business. Khamtay Siphandone, the former prime minister under the socialist hierarchy, was the country's richest man when he died. A former letter carrier, he climbed the party hierarchy under French rule and made a career in the Pathet Lao, eventually replacing Kaysone Phomvihan as prime minister in 1991. Being a member of the Pathet Lao since its beginning and having a modest social background served as valuable symbolic capital to facilitate Khamtay Siphandone's rise within the party hierarchy. Being a long-serving member was also critical because upward mobility was more difficult for newer members who did not have social capital from the days of the revolution. The Siphandone

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family, which accumulated riches of around US$1 billion, also serves as an example of how socialist leaders established an elite intergenerational tradition line: Khamtay Siphandone's son Sonexay became deputy prime minister in 2016 and his daughter Viengthong is a member of the Central Committee, an alternate board member of the IMF, and the wife of the governor of Luang Prabang province. Mobility into the elite is difficult when members of the old party leadership dominate all spheres of society.

While the capitalist transformation of Laos remains in its infancy, a process that resembles that of Thailand—in which party officials, capitalists and the old nobility merge to form a dominant class through intermarriage and horizontal mobility—can be observed (Rehbein 2017: 76). The small size of the elite means that almost everyone is somehow related to each other and that families combine aspects of several sociocultures: they comprise (for the most part) party leaders, own their businesses and have family connections to the old nobility and military. Therefore, the power of multiple spheres and all tradition lines may be found in a single family (e.g., one member is in the party leadership, one is part of one or several businesses, one is a military commander-in-chief, one owns land, one owns media outlets). In Laos, the capitalist structure remains closely interwoven with the party hierarchy. A distinctly capitalist class structure is not yet developed, and few capitalist entrepreneurs exist. Examples of members of the elite with a background rooted in the capitalist socioculture include Lao tycoons Hao and Leuang Litdang, who founded the Dao Heuang coffee brand and turned their company into a business empire. However, they also depend on a system of patrimonial exchanges with the socialist party elite. Their daughter Boonheuang, for instance, is vice president of the company while also serving as vice president of the Communist businesswomen's association.

The structure of the Lao dominant class is rooted in the precolonial and colonial aristocracy of the mueang. Social mobility from the lower segments of society occurred due to the 1975 socialist revolution, which lifted those who were part of the early resistance into higher office. However, it did not destroy the old order, as the Khmer Rouge did in Cambodia (see next section). Members of the nobility and the old 'power elite' either joined the new state (if in lower positions) or went abroad; some eventually returned. The socialist leaders formed a dominant class that carries out the functions of capitalists and political leaders. Those emerging from the young capitalist order are entering the political elite via intermarriage and networking, but this may change in the future when the dominant class is unable to integrate the increasing number of people in the capitalist elite into its patrimonial network.

Cambodia

Initially, the Cambodian 'power elite' structure was very similar to the Thai and Lao ones, with a royal court and family from precolonial socioculture and an intellectual elite rising during the protectorate. This 'power elite', called *neak ches-doeng* ('those who can think'), increasingly replaced court administrators in the colonial apparatus (Edwards 2007: 67-86). However, as in Thailand and Laos, in addition to being recruited directly from the court itself, Cambodia's colonial elite came from families promoted by or with connections to the court, thus marking the importance of social capital for entry into the field of power. Similar to Laos, they were then trained in colonial schools that incorporated not only colonial socioculture that valued cultural capital in the form of Western education but also French ideals that tended towards revolutionary thinking, nationalism, and anti-royalism (Bultmann 2015: 54-56). Important segments of the Khmer Rouge also came from this intellectual elite or were promoted by it. The Khmer Rouge's top leadership comprised Paris-educated intellectuals with various connections to the old dominant class, which they began to purge upon coming to power (Kiernan 2004 [1985]).

The Khmer Rouge comprised anti-intellectual intellectuals, veteran cadres with connections to Vietnam and troops who had managed to rise to higher positions as military commanders. Although the regime set new principles of social hierarchisation that enabled the rise of revolutionarily clean cadres with 'proper' backgrounds from the peasantry and the working class (especially if they had been part of the tiny early inner circle), the top command remained largely an intellectuals' club. However, the Khmer Rouge's systematic purges of the old 'power elites' and party leaders (Kiernan 2002), combined with the Vietnamese occupation, drastically altered the structure of Cambodia's dominant class. The regime's radical socialist engineering program left large parts of the dominant class dead, with survivors fleeing the country. After the flight of the old dominant class and the Khmer Rouge leadership, the incoming

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Vietnamese occupation forces struggled to recruit cadres for the state apparatus of its People's Republic of Kampuchea. The central leadership of this new state comprised just 25 people recruited from early Khmer Rouge defectors—the so-called Khmer Vietminh—who left during the pre-1975 purges, and a group of cadres who fled the country during the purges of the Eastern Zone from 1977 onwards (Slocomb 2004). These cadres came from lower social backgrounds within the peasantry and had made modest livings as mid-ranking military commanders of the Khmer Rouge. The special circumstances of their rise produced a rupture within the country's dominant class, with former mid-ranking Khmer Rouge from non-elite backgrounds now controlling the Cambodian state under Vietnamese occupation (Bultmann 2020). Eventually, the new Eastern Zone elite—including figures such as Hun Sen, Heng Samrin, and Chea Sim—demoted, side-lined and purged the Khmer Vietminh.

The rupture in the dominant class between this new 'power elite' and the old royalist and intellectual elite groups characterised conflicts that persist to this day in Cambodia. The Paris Peace Agreement and the peace missions UNAMIC and UNTAC enabled the return of the old 'power elites', who have since clashed with the Hun Sen elite. While this conflict is well known, new strife has arisen between the Hun Sen elite—tycoons, loyalists, and second-generation cadres who still occupy the Central Committee that is an institutional residue of socialism despite the official transition to a constitutional monarchy—and a new group of capitalist entrepreneurs. Although many of the newly rich entered the 'elite pact' with the ruling Hun Sen party (Dahles 2013), some only did so to keep themselves afloat and protect their businesses while remaining critical of the government, at least behind closed doors (Bultmann 2020: 150–152). Notably, most of the capitalist entrepreneurs have a Sino-Khmer family background. These entrepreneurs' life stories are strikingly similar, with parents from dominant trading groups before the Khmer Rouge's rise who fled the purges of the upper classes and resettled abroad; their children eventually returned to Cambodia with highly valuable skills, education, and university degrees during the mid-1990s. This group of entrepreneurs, profiting from economic liberalisation and often double-digit growth rates, is rich but does not rule (yet) as they depend on the Hun Sen elites' goodwill.

A famous example fitting this description and exemplifying the emerging conflict structure is Kith Meng. With his Chinese business background, Kith Meng lived in Kandal province as a child until the Khmer Rouge takeover. His wealthy parents died of starvation in a labour camp but he survived and fled the country during the Vietnamese occupation, resettling in Australia in 1980. Upon returning to Cambodia in 1991, he founded a company called the Royal Group and primarily made money by selling furniture and office supplies to the United Nations. Over many years, he grew his company into a business empire that specialises in joint ventures with international companies. Kith Meng now has stakes in telecommunication companies, electricity, finance and banking institutions, broadcasting, and Cambodian Royal Railways. However, these riches depend on patrimonial exchanges with the Hun Sen elite, earning him the honorary title of an *oknha* for his contributions to party-run 'development projects'. He regularly stresses that his ambitions do not include any political leadership position, but many observers and Cambodians compare his conduct, background, and ambition to Thaksin Shinawatra.

This has not escaped Hun Sen's notice, of course. However, the elite pact functions smoothly as long as the newly rich segment remains small and everyone profits from the pact. This nascent capitalist class remains part of the dominant class's crony network and is not yet an oligarchy with a degree of independence. Accordingly, in times of economic turmoil, such as when Europe threatened and eventually took away Cambodia's 'Everything but Arms' trade preferences, small cracks began to show. After alleged criticism from Kith Meng over the handling of the economic and political crises triggered by human rights abuses against the opposition and the population, the Hun Sen elite lashed out not directly at Kith Meng but instead at his brother, Kith Thieng. In early 2019, Thieng was arrested on charges of drug trafficking (Hutt 2019). Although in its infancy, a new type of power struggle is gradually emerging, not between the former Eastern Zone cadres surrounding Hun Sen and the old elites, but between his forces and a nascent and currently still tiny class of capitalist entrepreneurs trying to protect their businesses and economic growth.

Conclusion

In contrast to Laos, Cambodia's violent upheavals left deep rifts among segments of the dominant class, particularly between the Hun Sen elite within royalty and the intellectuals and former state officials. At a

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stage that does not yet constitute a major fissure but exhibits structural similarities to Thailand, Cambodian business elites of predominantly Chinese heritage are starting to challenge the old 'power elites'. The 'power elites' within the dominant classes of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia all reflect their sociocultural origins, although Thailand's royalty was much stronger than those in Laos and Cambodia and was never under direct colonial control. The Lao 'power elites' were fragmented, very small, and came from three different courts that the French had merged into a nation-state. Therefore, the country's conflicts reflected both sociocultural divisions and precolonial regional fragmentation. The Khmer court was a weak tributary to the Siamese court before French colonialisation that the French eventually shaped into a small family of hereditary succession.

All three countries experienced the emergence of an intellectual elite that increasingly occupied political and state administrative positions. In Thailand, this group eventually led a coup against the royal family in 1932 but then entered an elite pact with the king after the Second World War, buttressed by US military and economic support during the Cold War. In Cambodia, the French-educated elite turned against the old order and eliminated traditional hierarchies, exempting only the anti-intellectual intellectuals in the party leadership. To a certain degree, social capital with the party elite was a means of improving the survival chances of a small section of people with higher class backgrounds. In Laos, the rupture was less violent but led to the emergence of non-elite party cadres at the upper levels of state power.

While Thailand did not experience any major disruptions, revolutions, or foreign interventions either before or especially after the Second World War, leaving older elite structures intact as a highly institutionalised 'network monarchy' (McCargo 2006), Laos experienced gradual changes (despite major external interventions such as US bombings and support for coups), and Cambodia saw violent events leave deep fissures in its dominant class that led to decades-long clashes between the old elites and the Hun Sen elite, currently exemplified by the government's attempt to remove the opposition of Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha. Still, the 'power elites' of all three countries increasingly struggle to incorporate capitalist elites. Although the latter were initially easy to integrate and nurtured the rulers' wealth, differences in thinking and social, political, and economic backgrounds have created tensions. This strife is most visible between rulers and capitalist elites, such as Thaksin in Thailand and (though nascent in degree) Kith Meng in Cambodia. While the Laotian 'power elite' is comparatively cohesive, the Thai elite (royal and capitalist) and especially the Cambodian one (old elites and Hun Sen elite) appear to have major cracks that cleave the power dynamic.

By pointing to the political history of conflicts among elite segments, this article has shown how major and long-term societal conflicts (both violent and nonviolent) often occur in social spaces among 'power elite' groups. For instance, eruptions such as the intermittent conflict between Hun Sen and the opposition happen in these spaces. Treating these conflicts as singular and non-structural events without understanding their political history confuses their underlying causes. As a result, only superficial measures have been taken by the international community, donors, etc. Explaining these conflicts requires considering the social structure of the dominant class. Conflict studies have primarily examined ethnic differences, political identities, and the recruitment of lower segments of society and their motives. The social structure of civil conflicts remains understudied, perhaps because access to elites for data collection is difficult.

Scholars seem to believe that it is easier and more fruitful to talk to armed groups' recruits rather than to their leaders. Unfortunately, this means that the burden of explaining structural conflicts is disproportionately placed on the rank and file, even though their membership—as highlighted in the literature—might be due to circumstantial reasons and opportunism (Kalyvas 2006; Schlichte 2003; Weinstein 2007) or symbolic violence (Bultmann 2018a). A comparative perspective on elite conflicts in Southeast Asia shows not only how important divisions and forms of cohesion in dominant classes can be to explain conflict patterns but also how social group cohesion may trump political divisions (e.g., during anticolonial strife in Laos) and how social divisions justify 'power elite' divisions in politically uniform systems (e.g., in Cambodia, with the conflict between the Hun Sen and Khmer Vietminh factions). Thus, a comparative approach offers us a foundation to theorise these divisions.

All these conflicts among segments of the dominant class cut through various political systems including colonial rule, socialist regimes, and democratic institutions. They highlight—against Pierre Bourdieu's treatment of social structures as a snapshot of the distribution of capitals (Bourdieu 2010)—the

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importance of political and social histories as well as changes in the valuation of capitals (e.g., education, royal ancestry, membership in revolutionary struggles and capitalist entrepreneurship). The members of the Thai, Lao, and Cambodian dominant classes do not owe their membership to capital as such (especially their economic capital) but to brief periods of sociocultural change that transformed the valuation of capitals and the principles of hierarchisation. The new principles match one specific group of newcomers who had previously been favourably positioned with fringes of the dominant class, its patrimonial network, and the lower administrative structure.

Applying Bourdieu to the study of dominant classes helps us understand how capitals enable certain groups to rise over others; it shows how capitals are not static as they underlie changing valuations. This effect cannot be captured by measuring amounts of capital but by analysing sociocultural change and its impact on elite recruitment. Dominant classes comprise a complex configuration of elite groups with roots in different sociocultures that are specific to different countries and political histories. This also means that dominant classes are not pyramids—as they are sometimes represented (particularly in Cambodia; see Karbaum 2011)—but a field of power contested not only in terms of elite groups struggling to control the state apparatus and secure a tradition line for their kin and members of their network but also in terms of the principles of hierarchisation.

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