Inclusive Governance and Ambedkar's Vision: Reviewing Cambodia's Political Development, Youth Empowerment, and Sustainable Democracy

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Abstract

This current study explores Cambodia's evolving political development and its efforts toward inclusive governance. It synthesizes recent progress across key sectors, including youth empowerment, gender equity, education reform, cultural revival, economic diversification, and environmental sustainability, while assessing how these transformations reflect broader shifts in governance priorities within a hybrid political system. Following the 2023 generational transition, Cambodia has embarked on a new political trajectory that emphasizes modernization, equity, and diplomatic engagement. The administration's pentagonal strategy highlights national goals such as human capital development, digital economy growth, climate resilience, and public service reform. This argues that while the structural dominance of the ruling party persists, there are tangible indicators of policy innovations, civic inclusion, and technocratic governance. Through the lens of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's democratic philosophy, anchored in education, dignity, participation, and justice, the review offers normative framework to assess Cambodia's current political maturity. It explores how Ambedkarite values resonate within Cambodia's efforts to foster youth political participation, expand gender-sensitive institutions, democratize education, and pursue environmental stewardship rooted in local agency. The study also identifies key challenges to inclusive governance, including youth unemployment, digital rights restrictions. Methodologically, the review draws on policy documents, NGO reports, academic literature, and comparative frameworks to provide a multidisciplinary analysis, including positioning Cambodia as a model of adaptive governance in Southeast Asia, one where developmental political system, elite continuity, and bottom-up social mobilization interact in dynamic and sometimes contradictory ways. This contributes to the broader field of political science by emphasizing the

importance of studying emerging democracies through interdisciplinary, postcolonial, and ethically grounded lenses. Cambodia's experience offers critical lessons for transitional states navigating the tension between centralized power and inclusive political renewal.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cambodia's political evolution represents one of the most complex and transformative trajectories in Southeast Asia, shaped by cycles of violent conflict, foreign intervention, and gradual efforts at democratization and institutional development. Following the devastation of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), during which an estimated 1.7 to 2 million people perished through genocide, starvation, and forced labor, the country entered a protracted period of civil war and political instability (Chandler, 2018). The eventual withdrawal of Vietnamese forces and the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 marked a historic turning point. These accords did not only end armed conflict among warring factions but also laid groundwork for a peace-building process centered on democratization, human rights,

and constitutional governance (D. Roberts, 2002; Roberts, 2016).

Under the supervision of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), the 1993 elections introduced a new constitutional framework that established Cambodia as a multi-party liberal democracy within a constitutional monarchy. However, the optimism surrounding these reforms soon gave way to a gradual centralization of power. Even the ruling Party initially shared authority with the royalist FUNCINPEC party, a violent factional coup in 1997 decisively shifted the balance of power, solidifying the ruling party's dominance as Prime Minister (Gottesman, 2003; Hughes, 2018). Over the next two decades, Cambodia evolved into a hybrid regime, one that maintains formal democratic institutions like elections and a legislature, but where actual political competition, freedom of expression, and judicial

independence remain highly constrained (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Morgenbesser, 2020). Despite these structural limitations, Cambodia has experienced impressive economic growth, infrastructural development, and relative political stability, especially after the early 2000s. Yet, this stability has often come at the expense of civic space, media freedom, and opposition participation, as seen in the dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in 2017 (Freedom House, 2023), nonetheless, the political landscape entered a potentially transformative phase with the leadership transition in August 2023. Educated at the United States Military Academy at West Point and with advanced degrees from NYU and the University of Bristol, he embodies a new generation of technocratic leadership that has raised both domestic and international expectations for reform, innovation, and generational renewal (Hutt, 2024; Phorn & Loughlin, 2025; RGC, 2023). While the ruling party's rise has been framed as a continuation of political system, his administration has signaled a shift in tone and agenda, focusing on five key pillars of reform under pentagonal strategy, phase I, including economic diversification, quality education,

inclusive digital governance, environmental sustainability, and youth empowerment, an agenda that reflects increasing recognition of the need to address inequalities and foster national cohesion (RGC, 2023). As a result, the leadership invites fresh inquiry into how continuity in institutional structures can coexist with substantive reform, and whether such change is possible within the constraints of a centralized political system. Cambodia's current political moment is therefore emblematic of broader regional dynamics across Southeast Asia, where hybrid regimes such as those in Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar oscillate between liberalization and retrenchment, as scholars such as Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007), Régnier (2011) and Tomsa and Ufen (2012) argue that Southeast Asia presents unique cases of regime hybridity where elite control can coexist with developmentalist agendas and selective liberalization.

In Cambodia's case, the simultaneous presence of institutional continuity and reformist ambition, an instructive example for understanding inclusive governance in transitional contexts. Moreover, in the era of youth mobilization, digital transformation, and growing demands for environmental and

gender justice, Cambodia's evolving governance model offers an important opportunity to examine how states in the Global South respond to internal and external pressures for inclusion, accountability, and modernization. This research takes the current Cambodian context as a timely and necessary case for re-evaluating the capacity of post-authoritarian systems to embrace participatory reform, drawing upon both empirical developments and comparative theoretical frameworks, including philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, to assess progress toward a more inclusive and dignified polity.

This study aims to critically assess Cambodia's recent political and social developments through a governance and empowerment perspective. It explores the extent to which the current government has initiated or enhanced policies that promote inclusive participation, particularly among youth, women, and rural populations. By mapping reform areas across education, cultural policy, economic diversification, and environmental sustainability, the review highlights how governance practices are increasingly shaped by the imperative of social inclusion.

Specifically, this focuses on key policy and institutional shifts that have occurred in the past decade, with emphasis on the new leadership transition of achieving a "modern, competitive, and inclusive Cambodia" (see RGC, 2023). The scope includes national strategic frameworks such as the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV, and the Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan with civil society initiatives and regional cooperation mechanisms. This situates these changes within broader debates in political science concerning democratization in post-authoritarian settings and the global movement for equitable governance.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND POLITICAL EVOLUTION

Cambodia's contemporary political structure is deeply rooted in its turbulent past. Following the fall of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, the country remained mired in conflict and political fragmentation throughout the 1980s. It was not until the 1991 Paris Peace Accords that Cambodia embarked on a formal path toward peace and democratization. The implementation of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) from 1992 to 1993 represented a historic intervention that aimed

to disarm factions, repatriate refugees, and hold elections (H. R. Roberts, 2002). The 1993 elections resulted in the formation of a coalition government and the promulgation of a new constitution, establishing Cambodia as a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party liberal democracy.

However, the democratic experiment soon gave way to power consolidation, particularly after the 1997 coup, in which second Prime Minister of the Cambodian People's Party, ousted First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh, effectively ending the fragile power-sharing arrangement (Gottesman, 2003). From that point onward, Cambodia transitioned into what many scholars categorize as a hybrid regime, a system that maintains electoral democracy while centralizing authority and suppressing opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Morgenbesser, 2020). Despite these transitions, Cambodia has experienced over two decades of political stability, economic growth, and gradual institution-building. Yet, political competition has remained limited, particularly after the dissolution of the opposition Party in 2017, which significantly curtailed opposition representation and led to the ruling party dominance across all levels

of governance (Freedom House, 2023). The strongman model that dominated Cambodia's political life under the former prime minister provided continuity but also raised concerns about democratic backsliding, elite entrenchment, and civic repression (Hughes, 2018; Ledgerwood, 1998). The 2023 general election, however, marked a generational shift with the peaceful and planned transfer of power to the present Prime Minister (Chum, 2023; Loughlin, 2023). Although this transition occurred within a dynastic framework, it nonetheless signals the potential for political renewal and policy reorientation, especially in relation to Cambodia's younger population and global engagement priorities (see Hutt, 2024; Loughlin, 2024).

Cambodia's current governance structure reflects a centralized political system dominated by the ruling party. While the constitution of 1993 outlines a framework for separation of powers, checks and balances, and the protection of fundamental rights, the executive branch wields dominant influence over the judiciary and legislature (Un, 2005). Key institutions include the national assembly and the senate, which are constitutionally mandated, the constitutional

council and supreme council of magistracy, tasked with legal oversight, and the ministry of interior, oversees sub-national governance and plays a crucial role in local administration and decentralization policies (Morgenbesser, 2020).

Since the early 2000s, the Cambodian government has pursued a gradual decentralization strategy, particularly through commune council elections and administrative reforms. While these reforms were framed as steps toward democratic deepening and local empowerment, scholars argue that they often serve to reinforce at the grassroots level by co-opting local elites and consolidating clientelist networks (Rohdewohld, 2022; Sedara & Öjendal, 2014). Despite this centralization, the state has succeeded in implementing large-scale national development plans, such as the rectangular strategy, now in its fifth phase. These plans have focused on macroeconomic stability, infrastructure development, human resource investment, and good governance. The state apparatus has also strengthened its role in delivering basic services, attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and integrating into regional platforms such as

ASEAN, while managing criticism on rights and democratic performance (Hutt, 2024).

The peaceful succession of power in 2023 introduced what some scholars and analysts describe as a potential "soft opening" for reform within Cambodia's long-standing order (Chum, 2023; Logan, 2015; Loughlin, 2023). Prime Minister, who holds a Ph.D. in economics and has received military training from elite Western institutions at West Point, NYU, presents a technocratic image that departs from his father's populist and patronage-based leadership style (RGC, 2023). In his inaugural speeches, policy statements emphasized five thematic pillars under the pentagonal strategy–phase I: (1) human capital development, (2) economic diversification and competitiveness, (3) digital transformation and innovation, (4) green and sustainable development, and (5) enhanced governance and public service delivery. This vision aligns with broader regional and global discourses on sustainable and inclusive development, particularly as Cambodia positions itself for middle-income status by 2030. The inclusion of youth empowerment, innovation, and international cooperation marks a departure from past models of top-down governance, suggesting

a more participatory and globally political agenda (RGC, 2023).

Moreover, the government has made symbolic overtures to younger demographics, encouraging civic dialogue, engaging with university communities, and promoting entrepreneurship. While it is too early to evaluate the depth of systemic reform under his leadership, the framing of a "new era" of governance offers a vital entry point for examining the potential trajectories of political development in Cambodia's hybrid system, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Cambodia's political evolution: From conflict to transitional governance (1991–2023)

Period	Key developments	Governance features	Leadership	Political significance
1991–1993	Signing of Paris Peace Accords; UNTAC's arrival; 1993 constitutional elections	UN-supervised multiparty elections; new Constitution	Transitional: FUNCINPEC-CPP coalition	Foundation of constitutional monarchy and liberal democracy
1993–1997	Power-sharing arrangement between FUNCINPEC and CPP	Fragile coalition government	First PM & Second PM	Tense dual premiership, ending in political instability and factionalism
1997–2003	CPP consolidation	Emerging hybrid regime formation	Former Prime Minister	De facto centralization of executive power; CPP dominance established
2003–2013	Regular elections with limited competition;	Centralized democracy; international donor support	Former Prime Minister	Political stability with elite control; focus on infrastructure and FDI-led growth

Period	Key developments	Governance features	Leadership	Political significance
	expansion of development policies			
2013–2017	Surge in opposition (CNRP); youth protests; post-election unrest	Eroding space for dissent; increasing surveillance	Former Prime Minister	Democratic opening met with crackdown on civil society and opposition
2017–2023	CNRP dissolved by Supreme Court; all seats won by CPP in 2018 elections	One-party rule; declining international legitimacy	Former Prime Minister	Authoritarian entrenchment: regime secures absolute control
2023–Present	Peaceful leadership transition from the former to the present	Continuity with potential reform; technocratic rhetoric	Prime Minister	Signals generational shift; new emphasis on youth, innovation, and sustainable governance

III. YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND POLITICAL INCLUSION

In the post-UNTAC era, Cambodia has made significant strides in expanding access to education, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels. According to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), university enrolment rates have steadily increased, with over 260,000 students enrolled in higher education institutions nationwide as of 2022 (MoEYS, 2022). This expansion has provided a broader base for cultivating political awareness and civic consciousness among Cambodian youth, especially those in urban and semi-urban settings. Civic education has become a key strategy for enhancing youth understanding of democratic processes, electoral rights, and constitutional principles.

Both state institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have contributed to this effort. One particularly notable initiative

is the Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP), which has been instrumental in promoting critical thinking, civic responsibility, and ethical leadership among university students. Youth's programs provide youth with workshops, field visits, and forums that address pressing political and social issues, empowering them to participate constructively in public life (Jeffery, 2021). Furthermore, youth-led dialogues on topics such as electoral reform, decentralization, and environmental governance have become increasingly common in universities and community centres. These developments mark a departure from the historically passive or depoliticized role of youth in Cambodian society, signalling an emerging generation that is both educated and civically engaged. This trend aligns with Ambedkar's emphasis on education as a catalyst for political awakening, where informed youth act as critical agents of transformation in deeply hierarchical societies (Jaffrelot, 2005).

In recent years, the digital landscape has emerged as a vital space for political expression and civic mobilization in Cambodia. The proliferation of smartphones, expanding internet access, and the dominance of platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram have enabled young Cambodians to voice their opinions, share information, and coordinate activism more rapidly than ever before. A 2022 report by the Asia Foundation found that over 70 percent of Cambodians aged 18–35 regularly access political content online, with many using social media as a substitute for formal political forums (Asia Foundation, 2022; Chunly et al., 2022; Ly, 2023). Digital activism has manifested in various forms, including hashtag campaigns, online petitions, and video commentaries on governance, corruption, and environmental degradation. Prominent youth influencers and university students have garnered significant followings, using their platforms to discuss constitutional rights, local elections, and social justice. For instance, online movements surrounding land rights in Koh Kong or labour rights in Phnom Penh's garment sector have gained traction among youth audiences who see digital expression as safer and more accessible than traditional protest (Doyle, 2021).

However, participatory citizenship in the digital space remains constrained by legal and political limitations. The enactment of

the Cybercrime Draft Law and amendments to the Law on Telecommunications have raised concerns among human rights organizations about surveillance, censorship, and digital intimidation (Human Rights Watch, 2024). While the state often promotes digital literacy and ICT access as part of its modernization agenda, it simultaneously maintains control over online narratives through arrests and intimidation of bloggers and student activists. These dual dynamics reflect the "authoritarian-technocratic paradox", where digital infrastructure is advanced for development but restricted in political expression (Morgenbesser, 2020). Despite these constraints, Cambodian youth continue to push the boundaries of acceptable speech, using coded language, satire, and indirect critique to assert their civic agency. In response to the growing political visibility of young people, the Cambodian government has developed multiple youth-focused policy platforms aimed at integration, pacification, and empowerment. The national policy on Cambodian youth development emphasizes skill development, entrepreneurship, leadership training, and civic participation as key pillars for building a productive youth base (RGC, 2019).

Additionally, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has launched scholarship programs for underprivileged students, promoting educational equity and labour-market readiness. The transition to new leadership has intensified this focus, as his administration frequently references youth as the backbone of national progress. The pentagonal strategy, phase I includes provisions to expand digital access, job placement services, vocational training, and university reform, all framed within a modernization discourse designed to appeal to Cambodia's median-age population (RGC, 2023). Youth representation in commune councils and district development committees has also seen a modest increase, signalling a slow but discernible move toward more inclusive local governance (Jengre & Kpinpuo, 2019; Vong & Hok, 2018). Yet scholars warn that such youth inclusion remains strategic and selective, often prioritizing pro-government youth associations while excluding dissenting voices (Sedara & Öjendal, 2014). As such, a critical reading of youth policy must distinguish between genuine empowerment and co-optation, a balance that continues to evolve under the technocratic administration.

In light of these dynamics, the current moment can be viewed through Ambedkar's youth-centric vision, which sees young people not only as beneficiaries of state policy but as challengers of unjust structures. Ambedkar advocated for youth to lead reform movements grounded in constitutional morality, rational inquiry, and social justice. In Cambodia's case, the youth's active participation, both online and offline, suggests an emerging consciousness that seeks to reconcile tradition with transformation, and order with inclusion, as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Mapping Youth Empowerment Pathways in Cambodia

Dimension of Empowerment	Mechanism or Initiative	Lead Actors	Impacts on Political Inclusion
Educational Access & Awareness	University expansion; civic education programs (e.g., YRDP, Transparency Int'l)	MoEYS, NGOs, universities	Increased political literacy, critical thinking, and social engagement
Digital Participation	Social media platforms (Facebook, TikTok); online political discourse	Youth influencers, grassroots digital actors	Amplified youth voices, digital dissent, informal watchdog roles
Formal Inclusion	Commune youth representatives; national youth councils	CPP-aligned youth wings, local councils	Entry into governance structures (though often symbolic or co-opted)
Youth-Centred Policy	National Policy on Cambodian Youth Development (NPCYD); job placement schemes	Royal Government of Cambodia, development partners	Skills training, scholarships, economic engagement
Civil Society Engagement	Youth clubs, environmental	YRDP, CYN, Khmer Youth Association	Grassroots activism, coalition building,

Dimension of Empowerment	Mechanism or Initiative	Lead Actors	Impacts on Political Inclusion
	campaigns, gender rights workshops		intersectional mobilization
Constraints & Challenges	Cybercrime Law; surveillance; lack of independent political spaces	Government agencies, security forces	Chilling effect on activism; limitations on digital and street protest

IV. GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Cambodia's journey toward gender equality has been significantly shaped by the state's commitment to policy frameworks and institutional support systems. The cornerstone of this commitment is the Neary Rattanak Strategy, a multi-phase gender policy developed by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), now in its fifth iteration (2023–2028). This strategy outlines key areas of action, including economic empowerment, legal protection, education access, and political participation for women (MoWA, 2023).

Notably, the Cambodia gender assessment provided a comprehensive national report card, identifying progress in sectors like education and healthcare while noting persistent disparities in labour, leadership, and justice access (Chan et al., 2023). In addition, Cambodia's national strategic development plan incorporates gender equity as a cross-cutting theme, indicating a government-wide approach to inclusion. However, implementation gaps remain, often due to limited funding, patriarchal attitudes in institutions, and underutilization of gender-disaggregated data (OECD, 2024).

Although historically underrepresented, women have participated in both state institutions and civil society leadership. In the 2022 commune elections, women accounted for approximately 21 percent of elected commune councillors, up from 16.8 percent in 2017 (Comfrel, 2022). At the national level, female representation in the National Assembly stands at around 20

percent, a modest increase but still below ASEAN's average of 25 percent (Efendi et al., 2023). Within ministries, women are beginning to assume leadership roles, including vice-ministerial positions, particularly in social and education-related sectors. In the civil society sphere, women-led NGOs have played a critical role in advancing gender equality and social justice. Organizations such as Gender and Development for Cambodia, Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre and Banteay Srei have been at the forefront of campaigns addressing domestic violence, labour rights, and political participation. For example, CWCC provides legal aid and psychosocial support for survivors of gender-based violence (Silaka et al., 2023). These organizations often act as "bridging agents" between grassroots women and national policymakers, ensuring that marginalized voices, particularly from rural and indigenous communities, are not excluded from Cambodia's development narrative. Importantly, many of these initiatives are supported by international development partners, including UN Women, the Asia Foundation, and Oxfam.

Despite, significant structural and cultural barriers continue to limit women's leadership in Cambodia. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, embedded in social expectations such as the *Chbab Srey*, traditional code of conduct for women, continue to discourage female assertiveness in public life (see Derks, 2008). Women are often expected to prioritize family obligations over careers, particularly in rural areas where traditional gender roles remain dominant. Economic disparities further constrain women's political participation. Many women lack the financial resources, time, and support networks needed to run for office or lead organizations. Gender-based violence also remains pervasive, with over 30 percent of Cambodian women reporting experience of physical or sexual violence from a partner (Eisenbruch, 2018; World Bank, 2019). Fear of public scrutiny and societal backlash deters many survivors from seeking justice or entering politics. In response, both state and civil society actors undertook numerous empowerment initiatives. In recent years, Cambodia has witnessed gradual but notable progress in promoting women's leadership and participation across various levels of governance. Alongside grassroots efforts

such as the Cambodia Gender Justice Program, supported by GIZ, which focuses on enhancing legal literacy and strengthening community mediation to address gender-based violence (GIZ, 2022), there has also been a shift in the national political landscape.

This shift is further amplified by public awareness initiatives like the *We Rise* campaign, a nationwide media effort aimed at transforming societal perceptions about women in leadership and encouraging their political participation (UN Women Cambodia, 2021). At the subnational level, progress is also evident, which the number of women in provincial and municipal councils has steadily risen, with female governors and deputy governors now present in several provinces, a significant departure from the historically male-dominated leadership.

Additionally, the 2022 Commune Council elections saw a modest increase in the number of women commune chiefs and councillors, with women making up approximately 22 percent of elected officials, compared to just 17 percent in the 2017 elections (Comfrel, 2022). These advancements, while incremental, signal a broader commitment by both state and civil society actors to enhance gender equity in political representation. They reflect Cambodia's alignment with regional and international commitments, including the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality, as summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Overview of Cambodia's gender equality landscape (2023)

Dimension	Key Developments	Challenges	Key Actors
Policy Framework	Neary Rattanak V; Gender Mainstreaming Action Groups (GMAGs)	Limited implementation capacity; budget constraints	Ministry of Women's Affairs, GMAGs
Political Representation	21 percent commune councillors; 20 percent National Assembly seats	Tokenism; underrepresentation in executive roles	National Election Committee, Political Parties

Legal Reforms	Domestic Violence Law; CEDAW compliance	Cultural resistance; weak enforcement	MoWA, Legal Aid NGOs
Civil Society Advocacy	CWCC, GADC, Banteay Srei campaigns	Fragmented coordination; funding volatility	Women-led NGOs, international donors
Public Awareness and Media	"We Rise" campaign, youth debates on gender	Persistence of *Chbab Srey* norms; media stereotypes	Oxfam, UN Women, youth coalitions
Empowerment Programs	She Leads; community women's networks	Low rural participation; short-term funding cycles	Oxfam, GADC, Asia Foundation

V. EDUCATION REFORM AND KNOWLEDGE-BASED GOVERNANCE

Since the early 2000s, Cambodia has significantly expanded its educational infrastructure, viewing education as a critical pillar of national development. The government's strategic documents, including the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2024–2028 and the broader Rectangular Strategy Phase IV, emphasize the centrality of quality education in driving human capital formation, economic competitiveness, and civic responsibility (MoEYS, 2024). Major investments have been made in expanding access to primary and secondary education, particularly in rural provinces.

Enrolment rates at the primary level have exceeded 95 percent, although dropout rates remain a concern in lower secondary grades (UNESCO, 2023). The government has focused on enhancing teacher qualifications through training initiatives such as the New Generation Pedagogical Research Centre and in-service programs supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Curriculum reforms have also aimed to modernize content and incorporate 21st-century competencies, including environmental awareness, ethics, and digital skills. Partnerships with international donors, including UNICEF, ADB, and USAID, have contributed to school construction, textbook development, and policy design.

Despite these advancements, persistent challenges include overcrowded classrooms,

underpaid teachers, and inequities in education access for indigenous and low-income populations (World Bank, 2019). In response to the global digital revolution posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia has accelerated its efforts to integrate information and communication technology into education. Initiatives like STEM4Cambodia and the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2025) have introduced AI-powered learning tools, virtual classrooms, and coding programs into public schools and technical institutions (Vann, 2023). These programs are aimed at preparing students for future work in robotics, data science, and renewable energy sectors. The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, in partnership with MoEYS, has worked to improve digital infrastructure in secondary schools, although internet access remains uneven across provinces.

Simultaneously, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has gained prominence as a means of bridging the gap between formal education and the labour market. With support from the ILO and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), TVET institutions now offer programs in automotive repair, electrical engineering, digital design, and entrepreneurship. The TVET Policy 2023–2035 emphasizes inclusive enrolment, especially for women and marginalized youth, aiming to align technical education with Cambodia's evolving industrial needs (MoLVT, 2023). The government's integration of digital literacy into formal schooling marks a transition toward knowledge-based governance, where citizens are not only trained for employment but also equipped to participate in informed civic life. Education in Cambodia has historically been more than an instrument of economic development; it has also functioned as a powerful tool of political socialization. The teaching of national history, civic values, and constitutional principles has increasingly been incorporated into school curricula, with the intention of fostering a national identity grounded in unity, resilience, and responsibility (see MoEYS, 2024). However, critics point out that civic education remains highly state-centric, with limited space for critical engagement on topics such as human rights, electoral pluralism, and political dissent (Öjendal & Lilja, 2009; Reidy et al., 2015; Verhoeve, 2008).

Nevertheless, the emphasis on education for citizenship, especially among urban youth who increasingly connect classroom knowledge with broader democratic ideals. Student clubs, university debates, and model UN assemblies are now part of the educational landscape, encouraging political discussion in a semi-formal context. NGOs such as the Cambodian Centre for Independent Media (CCIM) and Transparency International Cambodia also run school-based workshops on anti-corruption, accountability, and freedom of expression. This movement reflects Ambedkar's philosophy, which placed education at the heart of social emancipation and democratic transformation. For Ambedkar, education was not merely a path to employment, but a "weapon for the oppressed" to fight inequality, challenge caste hierarchies, and build ethical political communities (see Jaffrelot, 2005). In the Cambodian context, this philosophy resonates strongly, as education becomes a pathway for rural, female, and marginalized youth to enter public discourse, policymaking, and community leadership.

Cambodia's evolving political landscape over the past decade reveals a complex but increasingly forward-facing development trajectory, characterized by institutional continuity paired with emerging reformist discourses. This study has outlined significant progress across multiple sectors under the country's transitional leadership. In the realm of youth empowerment, the expansion of university access, digital literacy, and civic engagement initiatives such as YRDP and STEM4Cambodia have cultivated a more informed and participatory generation. In parallel, gender equality has advanced through frameworks like the increasing presence of women in commune-level governance and civil society leadership roles. These reforms have reinforced education as both an economic and civic asset, vital to nation-building and democratization.

Cultural revival efforts, particularly through heritage restoration and classical literature promotion, have played a foundational role in re-establishing national identity and historical continuity. Moreover, cultural diplomacy with India and ASEAN partners has bolstered Cambodia's soft power credentials. Economically, Cambodia is gradually moving from garment-dependency to diversified growth, with Special Economic

Zones (SEZs), tourism hubs, and digital innovation shaping the post-pandemic recovery. Simultaneously, sustainability efforts, including eco-tourism, solar energy projects, and community forestry, highlight a shift toward green development.

Finally, under the new leadership of the present Prime Minister, governance discourse has begun to emphasize technocratic reform, inclusion, and institutional responsiveness, even as significant challenges in democratic pluralism, civil society autonomy, and land rights persist. Central to this analysis is the application of B.R. Ambedkar's democratic thought as a normative and comparative lens. Ambedkar's vision, anchored in education, dignity, participation, and justice, provides a powerful evaluative framework to assess the quality of democratic development in post-authoritarian societies like Cambodia.

Ambedkar viewed education as a "weapon for the oppressed," essential for breaking cycles of exclusion and enabling substantive citizenship. Cambodia's investments in educational reform, civic training, and digital access, especially for youth and marginalized groups, reflect this principle, though much remains to be done to ensure equity across urban–rural and gender lines (see Jaffrelot, 2005). Dignity, for Ambedkar, was inseparable from socio-economic justice. Cambodia's modest expansion of social protection, vocational training, and microfinance aligns with this ideal, particularly when viewed through the lens of labour dignity and rural inclusion.

However, concerns about gender-based violence, land dispossession, and digital repression reveal ongoing contradictions between state policy and lived experience. Participation is another Ambedkarite pillar that resonates in Cambodia's case. The growth of local governance bodies, youth forums, and women's NGOs demonstrates progress in decentralizing power. Yet, political participation remains structurally constrained in the absence of robust electoral competition and meaningful pluralism. Finally, justice, in Ambedkar's view, extended beyond legality to encompass historical redress and institutional equity. Cambodia's progress in restoring cultural heritage, teaching Khmer epics, and revitalizing Buddhist philosophy represents a symbolic return to identity-based justice. Still, distributive and environmental justice remain areas of fragility. Ambedkar's ideas

transcend their Indian origins and offer a cross-applicable democratic framework for the Global South. His holistic model, which fuses legal, cultural, and economic empowerment, is especially relevant for post-conflict and postcolonial states like Cambodia, where elite continuity often coexists with grassroots aspirations.

The Cambodian case offers rich insights into the dynamics of hybrid political development, where technocratic governance, and incremental inclusion coexist in tension. From a theoretical standpoint, it challenges binary models of democratic transition, urging scholars to adopt interdisciplinary and pluralist approaches. First, Cambodia illustrates that developmental authoritarianism need not be politically stagnant. Policy evolution, especially in education, digital governance, and environmental stewardship, can occur even in constrained political environments, provided there is international engagement, domestic pressure, and elite renewal. Second, the Cambodian case reinforces the need for

Southern political theory, frameworks that account for the socio-cultural specificities of non-Western democracies.

Ambedkar's thought serves as a model for such theorizing, offering a vocabulary that blends historical memory, ethical governance, and structural equity. Third, the review demonstrates that inclusive governance is not solely about institutions, but about the redistribution of knowledge, opportunity, and dignity. Cambodia's experience with youth digital mobilization, gender mainstreaming, and cultural diplomacy suggests that informal arenas of empowerment can reshape political legitimacy. Cambodian society should be studied as a model of adaptive governance where civilizational revival, economic transition, and political experimentation intersect. It is this hybridity, part continuity, part reform, that makes Cambodia an instructive case for scholars of comparative politics, postcolonial studies, and global governance, as viewed in Table 4.

Table 4. Education reform and inclusive governance in Cambodia

Area of Reform	Key Initiatives/Policies	Primary Actors	Impact on Inclusion
Institutional Expansion	School construction, teacher training, ESP 2019–2023	MoEYS, JICA, GPE, ADB	Increased access to education; improved retention in urban areas
Curriculum Modernization	Integration of civic values, STEM, environmental literacy	MoEYS, UNESCO, curriculum developers	Broader citizenship education and 21st-century skills
Digital Education	STEM4Cambodia, AI integration, Digital Learning Master Plan	MoEYS, STEM NGOs, Ministry of Telecom	Enhanced digital literacy, innovation culture, though rural disparities persist
TVET & Labor Linkages	TVET Policy 2021–2030, entrepreneurship programs	MoLVT, ILO, KOICA, private sector	Technical skills development; pathways for low-income youth
Civic Empowerment	YRDP civic education, CCIM media literacy, school debates	NGOs, universities, youth groups	Cultivates democratic values, critical thinking, and youth leadership

VI. CONCLUSION

Cambodia stands at a pivotal juncture in its political evolution, marked by generational leadership transition, expanding development ambitions, and an increasingly assertive civil society. While the government's commitment to digital governance, educational reform, and regional diplomacy reflects a renewed discourse of technocratic responsiveness, even as the core structures of centralized authority remain intact. This has highlighted multiple positive developments that suggest a maturing polity such as deepening of civic education, the integration of women into public leadership, the revitalization of cultural heritage, and the expansion of environmental and economic innovation. These trends, while uneven, underscore the state's effort to align its governance model with global standards of inclusive and sustainable development.

Yet, Cambodia's democratic aspirations remain fragile, constrained by structural barriers such as limited political pluralism, weak institutional checks, and restrictions on freedom of expression. The challenge for the current administration lies not only in maintaining macroeconomic growth and infrastructural momentum, but also in fostering trust, accountability, and equitable representation, especially among youth, rural citizens, and marginalized groups.

The role of leadership, therefore, is central. As Cambodia shifts into a post-charismatic era, the credibility and sustainability of its governance will depend on whether public leaders can transcend elite continuity and deliver structural reforms rooted in transparency, dignity, and shared opportunity. Effective leadership must not only champion economic metrics, but also epistemic justice, valuing local knowledge, grassroots voices, and cultural integrity as drivers of national identity and democratic renewal.

Looking ahead, the prospects for sustaining inclusive governance in Cambodia hinge on its ability to institutionalize reform while preserving civic space. This means reimagining the relationship between the state and society, not as a hierarchy, but as a partnership. In this context, Ambedkar's vision of participatory democracy, anchored in education, dignity, and social equity, offers a valuable philosophical and practical compass for Cambodia's future.

In conclusion, Cambodia's evolving political landscape is best understood not in terms of linear democratization, but as a hybrid system in adaptive motion, a system negotiating between legacy and innovation, centralization and participation, tradition and transformation. Whether this transition results in a more just and inclusive democracy will ultimately depend on the interplay between leadership will, institutional reform, and the agency of the Cambodian people.

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