Liberal Hubris? Virtual Peace in Cambodia

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The article examines the nature of the peace that exists in Cambodia by critiquing the 'liberal peace' framework. The authors claim that, despite the best efforts of international donors and the NGO community, liberal peacebuilding in Cambodia has so far failed in many of its key aims. The liberal peacebuilding project in Cambodia has been modified by a combination of local political, economic and social dynamics, international failings, and the broader theoretical failings of the liberal peacebuilding process. There have been some important successes, but serious doubts remain as to whether this project has been or can be successful, not least because of the ontological problem of whether the liberal peace is at all transferable. This raises the question of what type of peace has actually been built. The authors argue that the result of international efforts so far is little more than a virtual liberal peace.

Keywords Cambodia · liberal peace · United Nations · peacebuilding · statebuilding

> What is, is, what is not, is not.
> The Tao is made because we walk it,
> things become what they are called.
> (Chuang Tzu)

Introduction

IN 1993, THERE SEEMED TO BE an early post-Cold War triumph for the UN and for the emerging liberal peace framework, strongly supported by an international community of peacebuilders. Following the proclamation of the Cambodian constitution and the creation of a new government in that country, the United Nations Security Council declared the successful completion of the mandate of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and withdrew. This heavily publicized (and much criticized) withdrawal was hailed as a great achievement for the United Nations, replacing a particularly brutal intrastate conflict with the liberal peace – a

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normative framework that underlay the institutional reforms the UN introduced through the peace process. However, as the present article argues, the liberal peacebuilding project in Cambodia has been modified by a combination of local political, economic and social dynamics,[1] international failings, and the broader theoretical failings of the liberal peacebuilding process. There have been some important successes, but serious doubts remain as to whether the project has been or can be successful, not least because of the ontological problem of whether the liberal peace is at all transferable.

UNTAC's mandate was both revolutionary and unprecedented with regard to the mission aims and the intrusive methods it employed to achieve them. Acting broadly to accomplish a comprehensive political settlement, UNTAC, with a budget of $1.7 billion, sought to establish overall command of the Cambodian socio-political and economic infrastructure by taking control of seven components.[2] These – consisting of human rights, electoral, military, civil administration, police, repatriation and rehabilitation elements (Durch, 1996) – amounted to a statebuilding exercise underwritten by the then emerging praxis of the liberal peace.

The concept of 'peacebuilding' was articulated by Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his *Agenda for Peace* in June 1992. In that report, the UN Secretary-General argued that there was a need to 'identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict' (Boutros-Ghali, 1992: 11). This reflected the trend of post-Cold War liberal peace, the supposed 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992), and arguably heralded a new statebuilding role for the UN. Despite notable setbacks for this role, such as in Somalia, the liberal peace thesis has permeated UN and international doctrine pertaining to peacebuilding, forming the mainstay of the later *Supplement to an Agenda for Peace* (Boutros-Ghali, 1995), the Millennium Development Goals,[3] the High-Level Panel Report (United Nations, 2004) and the new UN peacebuilding commission.

However, significant questions have to be asked both about the progress and the suitability of liberal peacebuilding in the Cambodian context. This article offers an outline of the liberal peace framework as conceptualized and constructed by international peacebuilders, and critically examines the question of whether the liberal peace has taken root in Cambodia, or whether it has turned out to be a naïve flight of fancy on the part of international actors. The authors are aware of the problems involved in making such an assessment, which should perhaps ultimately rest upon local voices. However, this article presents research that examines how international actors understand their achievements.

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[1] Chen Vannath, Director, Centre for Social Development, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 7 November 2005.
[2] See United Nations Security Council Resolution 745, 28 February 1992.
[3] See United Nations Millennium Declaration, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, A/55/L.2, 18 September 2000.

The Liberal Peace Framework

Derived from the universalizing imaginary of the mainly Western and developed international community that directs peacebuilding and development processes, the liberal peace framework (Richmond, 2005) combines democracy, free markets, development and the rule of law (Mandelbaum, 2002: 6; Duffield, 2001: 11; Paris, 2004). Its objective is argued to be a *self*-sustaining peace within domestic, regional and international settings, in which both overt and structural violence are removed and social, economic and political models conform to international expectations in a globalized, transnational setting. These liberal assumptions are also prevalent in most policy documentation associated with peace and security issues (United Nations, 2004). The liberal peace is assumed to be unproblematic in its internal structure, leading to its acceptance in post-conflict zones, though its methodological application may be far from smooth (Paris, 2004: 18). Yet, the liberal peace's main components – democratization, the rule of law, human rights, free and globalized markets, and neoliberal development – are increasingly being critiqued from several different perspectives (Snyder, 2000: 43; Annan, 2002; Chopra & Hohe, 2004: 292; Rieff, 2002: 10; Paris, 2002: 638).

There are four main strands of thought within the liberal peace framework, influenced by the key antecedents of, and debates in, international theory. These four strands are the 'victor's peace', the 'institutional peace', the 'constitutional peace' and the 'civil peace'. The *victor's peace* has evolved from the age-old realist argument that a peace that rests on a military victory, and upon the hegemony or domination of a victor peace is more likely to survive. The *institutional peace* rests upon idealist, liberal-internationalist and liberal-institutionalist attempts to anchor states within a normative and legal context in which states multilaterally agree how to behave and how to enforce or determine their behaviour. The *constitutional peace* rests upon the liberal Kantian argument that peace rests upon democracy, free trade and a set of cosmopolitan values that stem from the notion that individuals are ends in themselves, rather than means to an end (Doyle, 1983). The final strand identifiable is that of the *civil peace.* This is derived from the phenomena of direct action, of citizen advocacy and mobilization, from the attainment or defence of basic human rights and values, spanning the ending of the slave trade to the inclusion of civil society in international relations today (Halliday, 2001).

The liberal peace project can be broken down into several different gradations relating to the main intellectual strands outlined above. There is, first, the *conservative* model of the liberal peace, mainly associated with top-down approaches to peacebuilding and development, tending towards the coercive, and often seen as an alien expression of hegemony and domination,

sometimes through the use of force or through conditionality and dependency creation. This is completely dependent upon external support. The next discourse is provided within an *orthodox* model of the liberal peace, in which international actors are more wary of and sensitive about local ownership and culture, but still also determined to transfer their methodologies, objectives and norms into the new governance framework. This framework is dominated by attempts at consensual negotiation between international and local actors. This equates to a balanced, multilateral and still state-centric peace. This model is exemplified by the UN family's practices of peacebuilding and governance reform. A third discourse is provided by a more critical form of the liberal peace – the *emancipatory* model – which is concerned with a much closer relationship of local consent with local ownership, and tends to be very critical of the internationally propagated coerciveness, conditionality and dependency that form the basis upon which the conservative and orthodox models operate. This is mainly found within the bottom-up approach, and tends to veer towards needs-based activity and a stronger concern for social justice.

In sum, the liberal peace, as it is understood by the Western peacebuilding community, is imagined to provide military security, the institutions of consensual and democratic governance, economic opportunity, a rule of law and human rights. These should rest upon both external support and the empowerment of local agency, which combine to make this framework sustainable. In practice, liberal peacebuilding has created very weak states and institutions that are dependent upon foreign support and subject to contests over both power-sharing and corruption. There is often little connection between local and international actors and their respective objectives, and culture difference and comparative socio-economic status are often assumed to be insurmountable. Civil society is often marred by joblessness, a lack of development and opportunity, and grey and black markets. Liberal peacebuilding relies upon a hubristic belief that once institutions are provided, populations will simultaneously adopt and benefit from them regardless of local characteristics, culture and priorities.

Because this process has not fully emerged in many liberal peacebuilding operations around the world, a secondary position has been developed, according to which institutions may exist without being adopted by those they are intended for, at least for a short period. This means that, in the interim, the liberal peace project produces a *virtual liberal peace* in which democratization, human rights, the rule of law, freedom of the press, development and economic reform are deferred for an uncertain period – in other words, an illiberal peace in which the agency of the individual as a rights-bearing actor is also compromised. There is little way of knowing whether this deferral will become permanent or is indeed temporary. This often consigns vast swathes of the population to a secondary and uncertain

status while elites hijack the institutions of the liberal peace. This raises an important question: has the liberal peacebuilding project become a victim of state-capture, whereby a partial reform syndrome (Van der Walle, Ball & Ramachandran, 2003) means that local and international actors collude implicitly over the building of liberal institutions and the milking or evasion of those institutions by both as an alternative to civil war or military intervention on the part of the international community?

Constructing the Liberal Peace

UNTAC promised a 'comprehensive peace' settlement (Doyle, 1995: 13). Indeed, the Paris peace conference of 1991 adopted a wide-ranging agreement on political, social and economic issues, which included matters of sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, as well as the renovation of society and the economy.[4] The intention was to bring the four warring factions together and create via democratic elections a power-sharing government, while rebuilding state infrastructure with liberal institutions. The Paris agreement, which formed the basis for the UNTAC mandate, included provisions related to a ceasefire and disarmament, maintenance of law and order, repatriation of refugees, protection of human rights (via a new constitution), the control of supply and administrative machinery, and, crucially, the organization, conduct and monitoring of elections (Doyle, 1995: 15). The most important of these was, of course, democratization. As Heininger (1994: 67) points out in relation to the conflict in Cambodia, 'unlike most post-cold war conflicts, neither ethnic nor tribal hatreds drove it. Rather it was a simple struggle for political power by different factions' (see also Chandler, 1998). These groups or factions consisted of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) led by Hun Sen, Prince Sihanouk's FUNINPEC party, the Khmer Rouge, and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). Chandler (1998) suggests that the political history of Cambodia can be described as a struggle among factions over three visions of order: royalism, parliamentarianism and socialism.

  The underlying assumption of the UNTAC mission was that if elections were imposed on the Cambodian political system and a measure of power-sharing established between the groups, coupled with the implementation of liberal reforms in society and a market economy, a liberal order would naturally follow (Paris, 2004: 79). Consequently, UNTAC faced a mammoth state-building task. For this it received a budget of $1.5 billion, $595 million of which was for rehabilitation to 'restore a sustainable degree of economic and social stability' (Lizee, 2000: 102). This was to be achieved, as Lizee explains, by subordinating the political control exercised by factions or subfactions to

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[4] See United Nations Security Council Resolution 745, 28 February 1992.

that of a newly centralized means of governance.[5] The nature of the peace that UNTAC intended to introduce in 1992 closely followed the pattern of a conservative liberal peace according to the typology developed above. It was to be achieved by force and diplomacy, and would represent a constitutional peace, conceived, instituted and imposed on Cambodia entirely from 'outside'. Social and developmental aspects of the new peace were less significant, though NGOs and other actors did give an 'orthodox peace' element to the peacebuilding process.

The UNTAC mandate, which itself represented an exercise in social engineering, had a liberal lineage derived from the development of Western states and the belief that peace follows the development of democracy. Hence, the structure of peace UNTAC set out to create was to be achieved by remodelling Cambodia according to the example of the Western state (Lizee, 2000: 105). What is more, UNTAC was expected to provide relatively quick results, shifting from a conservative to an orthodox liberal peace, given that a peace agreement had already been arrived at and was focused upon the holding of 'free and fair' elections. This would provide the exit point for UNTAC and would dismantle its control of key aspects of governance. According to Lizee (2000: 103), a system of political power was to be established that was to be based on 'a centralised and far-reaching managerial apparatus [that would] allow an administrative supervision and indeed regulation of Cambodian society without any resort to force'. Furthermore, political rights expressed through state power would be developed, containing provisions for human rights that would shield individuals from the arbitrary use of violence by state agencies. This would be complemented by the development and promotion of liberal economic market forces and a capitalist economy that would 'serve to instil the notion of freedom of economic choice leading to the freedom of political choice' (Lizee, 2000: 103), and thus the social empowerment of the individual.

These political and economic developments were intended to complement the creation, development and growth of civil society. The latter has been a slow process, but it has been aided by the availability of donor funding[6] and the creation of pressure groups and organizations, some purely political but the majority nongovernmental. These included 'advocacy, watchdog, and single-interest groups such as professional associations; community groups; credit societies; and user groups' (Curtis, 1998: 119). NGOs were to encourage

> participation and awareness, help reduce poverty at the grassroots level, promote peace, democracy and human rights; assist in safeguarding democratic processes, observe in elections, strengthen the government's understanding and knowledge of rule of law, and help in dispute-solving (Saray, 1996).

[5] World Bank officials, personal interviews, Phnom Penh, 7–8 November 2005.
[6] World Bank officials, personal interviews, Phnom Penh, 7–8 November 2005.

Indeed, NGOs have played a particularly significant role since the UNTAC period in developing and sustaining the liberal peace through their contributions to the rebuilding of Cambodian society. In fact, the presence of NGOs, especially indigenous ones, has been interpreted as a positive indicator of the (re)emergence of civil society in Cambodia.[7] According to Pact (2005), an international NGO, over 400 Cambodian NGOs are working throughout the country. Between 1992 and 2001, the donor community has disbursed more than $4 billion to – and through – NGOs (CDC, 2001).

The consensus of opinion of scholars working on UN operations suggests that despite the enormity of the project, UNTAC was a success (Doyle, 1995: 361). The mission to achieve organized elections succeeded, with participation by an impressive 90% of the electorate. UNTAC helped establish national self-determination and independence, ended the civil war, and repatriated 370,000 refugees (Doyle, 1995: 371). However, it is debatable whether the withdrawal of UNTAC following the elections suggests that a transition from a conservative to an orthodox liberal peace had occurred, as the international community had expected.[8]

Into the vacuum created by the departure of UNTAC moved peacebuilding actors such as international organizations, regional organizations, international financial institutions, leading agencies and the NGO community, which sought to shore up the liberal peace and the Cambodian state. Between 1992 and 2001, 18 major bilateral donors[9] and several multilateral ones provided funding of more than $4 billion (Peou, 2005: 112). In 1992, the International Monetary Fund introduced an economic stabilization programme, designed to cut capital and social spending. This was followed up by a structural adjustment loan, designed to stimulate market reforms (United Nations, 1996). The economy grew from 1992 to 2002 by 7% per annum, with an average growth rate of 4.6% in 1993–2000 (Sok & Acharya, 2002: 14–15). A number of 'successes' – including the elections and rehabilitation programme; state and civil society development via the control of the state's finances, currency and budget; the development of human rights via the adoption of the main human rights covenants; re-education programmes; and the granting of freedoms of press, association and movement – are regularly invoked (Doyle, 1995: 40). Accordingly, an orthodox liberal peace should have taken root in Cambodia by the time UNTAC departed.

Yet, 13 years after the withdrawal of UNTAC and following an investment of over US $5.66 billon in aid (by 2003) from donors and lenders (EIC, 2005a: 34–35), some of which has funded the activities of over four hundred NGOs, has a self-sustaining (liberal) peace taken root in Cambodia? Perhaps even

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[7] Emma Leslie, Alliance for Conflict Transformation, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 11 November, 2005.

[8] As Ham Samnang argued, the elections were free but not fair. Ham Samnang, Senior Research Fellow, Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 10 November 2005.

[9] Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Sweden, Thailand, the UK and the USA.

more to the point, should it have – and, if so, why? Former UNTAC commander John Sanderson (2001: 155) suggested in 2001 that 'the Cambodian people find themselves in a state which remains largely lawless some nine years after the Paris peace agreements, due to less than successful attempts through the ballot box to produce a form of properly consensual government'. Indeed, there is a substantial body of work discussing the failures of the mission (Berdal & Leifer, 1996; Schear, 1996; Kato, 1997).

Consensus within the more critical work on the main failures of the UN mission focuses principally on the inability to obtain a complete ceasefire and fully disarm, demobilize and canton 70% of the military forces of the four main factions (Chandler, 1997: 34). Indeed, the withdrawal of the Khmer Rouge from the power-sharing settlement in the summer of 1992 (Berdal & Leifer, 1996: 40) can be seen as a fundamental failure not only of the peace process, which relied upon the actual representation and participation in government of the various factions, but also of the attempt to export liberal norms into the existing political framework. UNTAC failed to fully instigate the required political, social and economic structural changes required for a liberal peace.

The following sections further examine the problems that have emerged with each major component of liberal peacebuilding in Cambodia.

Democratization and Good Governance

UNTAC's role in the introduction of the mainstay of liberal peace – democratization – was far from successful. It would perhaps be unfair to apportion all the blame on UNTAC for this, though the democratic elections of 1992, 1998 and 2003 were not particularly representative. UNTAC's 'free and fair' elections of 1992 were enough to satisfy its mandate (Doyle, 1995: 9),[10] but did not go far enough in breaking the dictatorial nature of the underlying political system. Indeed, Hun Sen's State of Cambodia (SOC)[11] used the elections to legitimize its monopoly on power. As the Khmer Rouge claimed at the time (as a reason for their departure from the peace process), real political power had not been transferred to the Supreme National Council of Cambodia.

Although FUNCINPEC won more votes than the CPP and King Sihanouk became head of state, Hun Sen never relaxed his hold on the reigns of governmental power. In fact, he progressively increased, centralized and

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[10] FUNCINPEC won 45.5% of the votes, Hun Sen's CPP 38.2%, while the Khmer Rouge abstained.

[11] SOC is the term given to the provisional government established during the UNTAC period immediately preceding the election. It was comprised predominantly of the CCP under Prime Minister Hun Sen and therefore represented a continuation of the monopoly on power of the autocratic regime installed by the Vietnamese following the civil war.

strengthened his own personal grip. Consolidating on a 1997 coup, Hun Sen now established himself in an unrivalled position of power following his gradual erosion of FUNCINPEC strength and the increasing repression of certain ethnic groups by the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), both of whom formed the opposition movement Alliance of Democrats after the 2003 election. The apparent endgame occurred following the 2003 election. Sensing a possible defeat, Hun Sen orchestrated a virtual 'palace coup' in which he formed a government that destroyed FUNCINPEC power and exiled the SRP (Heder, 2005: 114–127). This led Sam Rainsy – recently exiled and indicted for election fraud – to remark, ironically:

> as a fake democracy, Cambodia is a country with only a democratic façade made up of apparently democratic institutions, which are functioning in fact in the most autocratic way (*Phnom Penh Post*, 2005).

Democratization has been a tenuous process. This is due partially to the strong political traditions of power (and violence) that are inherent in Cambodian society. The lack of democracy in Cambodia should not be explained via inherency or culturalist arguments, however, and the belief, or at least assumption, that an indigenous political system and indeed economic system is completely absent or completely deviant in post-conflict 'failed states' such as Cambodia is an oversimplification. This assumption often legitimates the installation of the liberal peace framework upon a 'terra nullis' with little regard for actually existing practices and institutions, which are automatically delegitimized even if they were not part of the dysfunctional politics that had led to conflict in the first place. This move establishes 'peace through governance', in which liberal modes of governance for all of a state's key aspects are installed, and often even controlled, by international actors. Yet, clearly, one of the shortcomings of UNTAC from this perspective was its failure to remove or prevent the absolute domination of power by one party.

The Cambodian conflict is rooted in the contention for power and the monopoly of violence and resources, framed by competition over control of the modern state. Part of the liberal peace framework involves the creation of a Weberian state, in which violence is monopolized by the state on the assumption that it will not exploit this role. However, as Roberts (2001: 32) argues, imposed elections and the democratic process 'merely changed the vehicle for communicating hostility and confrontation, from war to elections' at the elite level. Hence, the monopoly of violence was of benefit to the incumbent in this process:

> the significance of the [Cambodian] conflict has not changed. It remains a vital struggle for political power in an extremely hostile environment where the consequence of absolute defeat and marginalisation could be dire. Power in Cambodia, traditionally and contemporarily, has been of an absolutist nature, with little tolerance of opposition (Roberts, 2001: 32).

Power and violence is not centralized in the mechanics of the state but is insti-
tutionalized in governance and therefore monopolized by the ruling party.
This obviously blocks the process of democratization. This is because liberal
peace is based on the understanding that society embraces the institutions of
the state, legitimized by democratic elections, and the state centralizes and
monopolizes the means of violence, as well as establishing the rule of law,
human rights and the conditions necessary for the distribution of material
resources. It is premised upon governance based on assumed universal stan-
dards and majoritarian compromise, which in this case undercuts the contest
of power between political elites.

  For this reason, the 'logic' of liberal peace in Cambodia has remained
virtual, unless it renders the contest for power nonviolent (Lizee, 2000:
124–137). If it is accepted that the liberal peace project is viable despite this, it
must also be accepted that this process is also a comprehensive form of social
engineering, requiring the institutionalization of liberal forms of governance
within the state and their control by external actors. Thus, a lexicon that
increasingly accompanies the language of liberal peace is that of statebuild-
ing, which provides the shell in which governance is instituted along liberal
lines. Fukuyama (2004: 13) suggests that the dimensions of liberal 'stateness'
revolve around 'state function' and 'state capacity', where functions are the
role of states and capacity the ability to carry out them out. The Cambodian
state – a weak state in this instance – has a very limited scope of government
functions and a low capacity to achieve them. In terms of good governance,
the democratic process is clearly being interfered with, corruption is rife, and
the general population has little agency, politically, economically or socially,
other than in limited and very localized contexts.[12] The logic of this demo-
cratic deficit would, within the liberal peace framework, indicate that strong
external involvement to remedy these flaws is required – thereby justifying
liberal interventionism as a basis for peacebuilding.

  This also raises a number of issues about how democratic institutions are
built and how 'good governance' is made sustainable. Perhaps the most
important question revolves around the role of the internationals. Inter-
national organizations, regional organizations, and international and local
NGOs are all integral parts of the liberal democratic reform process.
Following the extensive UNTAC remit, these organizations were drawn into
the reconstruction vacuum created by the departing UN mission. NGOs
provided essential support to the country's rehabilitation and reconstruction
by supplying financial and technical assistance, plus training and capacity-
building activities (Curtis, 1998: 131). However,

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[12] Senior Advisor, Asian Development Bank, personal interview, 8 November 2005. Because of poor govern-
      ance ratings, the Asian Development Bank has reduced its commitment to Cambodia.

most international NGOs do not support local NGOs and few have well-developed plans for capacity building and institutional support. They are unclear about the future and have no handover strategies, leaving the sustainability of their programmes in doubt. Also, their assumptions about developments in Cambodian society are unclear and their methods of working with the government are inconsistent.(Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, 1995: 75)

Yet, the NGO community provides many of the resources or capacities that the liberal state should provide, and has become the de facto state according to some. It is a widely held belief that if the internationals left the country, even the conservative liberal peace apparently in existence would quickly disintegrate.[13] International donors, frustrated with the endemic corruption and weakness of state governance, circumvent the bureaucratic inefficiency of government and instead fund NGOs directly. Although this has obvious short-term benefits, it not only undermines local capacity-building but also exacerbates the very problem it is supposed to solve. Little indigenous capacity is developed, and no knowledge or experience of liberal governance is created. This form of 'capacity destruction' (Fukuyama, 2004: 55) creates a dilemma: peacebuilders and donors need to remain closely involved to support democratization and capacity-building in other areas of the liberal peace framework, but by doing so they undermine local capacity. If they do not remain closely involved, local elites may return to their competition over the monopoly of violence. From this perspective, the liberal peace looks unlikely to ever be anything but virtual.

Other international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank are also tiring of the corruption in government, and therefore attach conditionality to their loans and grants (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2003).[14] Although this is intended to 'fight' corruption, the main victims are the fledgling local organizations that again suffer a loss of capacity. Although there is a strong argument that conditionality is a failed strategy that does more harm than good (Fukuyama, 2004: 49), it still features in the country strategies of the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank in Cambodia.[15] So, far from the situation improving, the intent of Cambodia's main donors is for a 'draw down' due to a sense of imposing a 'failed plan [on Cambodia]',[16] which in itself is a condemnation of the transition to liberal peace. Perhaps even more damning is Roberts's belief that the failure of democratic transition in Cambodia is actually due to the liberal peace itself. He believes this represents the continuation of Western arrogance, based 'on the continuity of such thinking and assumptions as underpin the Liberal Project and the flawed conclusions upon which

[13] Emma Leslie, Researcher, Alliance for Conflict Transformation, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 11 November 2005.
[14] Confidential source, Asian Development Bank, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 8 November, 2005.
[15] See, Asian Development Bank (2004); World Bank (2005).
[16] Confidential source, Asian Development Bank, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 8 November 2005.

that agenda rests' (Roberts, 2001: 213). Democracy and good governance are very much virtual qualities of Cambodia's liberal peacebuilding project for most of the population, which underlines its inherent paradoxes.[17]

The Rule of Law, Civil Society and Human Rights

The paralysis of democratic government and civil society in Cambodia is widely attributed to the problem of corruption. USAID (2005) suggests $300–$500 million is 'diverted' from government coffers every year, a figure approximately equal to that of annual donor assistance. Indeed, the Centre for Social Development (CSD), an indigenous NGO campaigning against corruption, recognizes the institutionalization of corrupt practices. In a particularly detailed survey of 'everyday forms of corrupt practices', the CSD cites detailed examples from sectors ranging from public services such as water and electricity, through to education and health, business licensing, and the police, customs and the judiciary (Nissen, 2005). Given that free-market reform and neoliberal models of development underpin liberal peacebuilding, such practices seem to indicate a purposeful collusion on the part of actors who see the liberal peace as undermining their traditional privileges.

  This concern is illustrated by the main funders and donors, who see corruption as a major drain on their resources. Some organizations are resigned to the problem and have imposed conditionality, in the form of governance indicators, on loans (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2003); others have even withdrawn from funding some areas altogether (Asian Development Bank, 2004). Nevertheless, the UN, the World Bank, USAID, the Asian Development Bank and similar organizations are still heavily investing in anti-corruption plans, ranging from, ironically, cash funding to education, awareness and action programmes. Furthermore, the government of Hun Sen has established the fight against corruption as its first priority in its 'good governance' programme tied to the Cambodia Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2003: 26).

  Institutionalized corruption greatly influences the success of building the rule of law and a civil society. According to former Australian ambassador to Cambodia John Holloway in 1994, 'corruption at every level of society has again become a way of life in Cambodia. Every business deal must have a cut for the relevant minister . . . and every transaction involves a percentage for the relevant official' (cited in Curtis, 1998: 146). Endemic corruption – or the Western understanding of it – is at the core of Cambodia's hierarchical socio-political framework. This is constructed and operated on a feudal basis, at the heart of which is the patron–client relationship propagated by elites.

[17] Confidential source, Asian Development Bank, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 8 November 2005.

Anthropologist Lindsay French observes that 'political power and control has traditionally involved the accumulation of an entourage of assistants, employees, and loyal followers who provide support in exchange for various forms of protection and assistance' (cited in Curtis, 1998: 111). The hegemonic domination of political power underwrites the patronage system and allows networks to be constructed from the top down, based on loyalty and rewards. Such dynamics can be seen in liberal states, of course, but political defeat and the possibility of marginalization from power are of relatively greater consequence in a society where resources are particularly scarce.

These are sweeping ontological claims to make about another political system, but they help explain how the Cambodian polity is overlaid by a network comprised of a multidimensional clientelism and patronage that links individuals to power centres. From the perspective of international peacebuilders, such an analysis helps explain why local social, political and cultural dynamics are responsible for a lack of progress, rather than inadequacies in the liberal peacebuilding framework itself. The creation of liberal peace would therefore mean that the rule of law, a vibrant civil society and the acceptance of human rights would replace these dynamics. These are also sweeping liberal assumptions.

It is unsurprising in the light of this that it is widely argued that 'civil society' does not really exist in Cambodia. According to this view, it emerged in the UNTAC era, facilitated by donor funding (Curtis, 1998: 110–149). Yet, in the light of the institutions of clientelism and patronage, doubts plague the effectiveness of this new 'civil society' with regard to the access and political influence that NGOs and other groups have, and their dependency upon external funding.[18] Civil society is quite possibly an illusionary 'virtual' or 'parallel' society created by the presence and funding of the internationals, and mainly visible to international eyes. Far from aiding the development and sustainability of an indigenous civil society, it is representative of conditionality and dependency rather than local agency. A report by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development argues that

> as a result of its politicisation and militarisation, humanitarian assistance has taken ever more massive and spectacular forms and tends increasingly to substitute and destroy local resistance and coping mechanisms and institutions rather than to support and enforce them (cited in Curtis, 1998: 122).

These fears are echoed by Thun Saray, an indigenous NGO coordinator:

> our emerging civil society is very dependent on outside funding. We hope such dependency is only temporary . . . however; there are certain donors who impose models of development on their partners and control their growth and development. This has led to donors setting up their own local structures instead of entrusting tasks to existing, genuine local organisations (*Phnom Penh Post*, 1996).

[18] Official source, USAID, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 8 November 2005.

These problems are further compounded by the inadequacy of and subsequent lack of confidence in the rule of law, which instead is displaced by practices associated with clientelism and patronage, according to international actors. As the former UNTAC force commander commented, 'laws in Cambodia are made at the whim of the controlling elite rather than the legislature and justice does not exist for the large majority of Cambodians. The opposition exercises its privileges at the discretion of the executive rather than by the law as it does in liberal democracies' (Sanderson, 2001: 155). The rule of law survives mainly at the whim of almost feudal local custodians, and the existence of a vibrant civil society is mainly derived from international perspectives coloured by an almost non-secular faith in the virtuosity of the liberal peacebuilding project.

  Another vital pillar of the structure of liberal peace – human rights – is not in a much better position. In 1992, UNTAC promised extensive initiatives to respect, observe and protect the human rights and freedoms of Cambodian citizens.[19] However, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2005: 16), 'Cambodia in 2005 saw a sharp reversal in progress towards observing human rights and developing political pluralism since the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords'. This includes political intimidation, directed especially against political opponents of the government, such as the SRP,[20] but also against independent media and civil society (HRW, 2005: 19). The judiciary is also widely viewed as corrupt, incompetent and biased. According to HRW (2005: 26), it continues to be used to 'advance political agendas, silence critics, and strip people of their land'. In fact, the CSD, in a report on human rights, gives the judiciary and courts the 'most dishonest institution' rating (almost off the scale), closely followed by the customs and the police (Nissen, 2005: 101). Also extensively contravened are freedoms of association and assembly, as 'threats to human rights defenders have intensified, with grass roots activists and human rights workers being subjected to harassment, intimidation, restrictions of movement, legal action, and physical violence' (HRW, 2005: 32). In response to these continuing problems, UNDP has launched a development assistance framework (UNDAF) for the period 2006–10. In conjunction with the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the UK Department for International Development, it intends to promote good governance and the promotion and protection of human rights (UNDP, 2004: 5). But, once again, the success of this programme requires close government cooperation. Clearly, human rights programmes have emerged in the last 13 years, but it appears that a central branch of the liberal peace has so far failed to fully take root.

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[19] See Paris Accord, Part 3, Article 15, Annex 1, Section E, UN document no. S/23177.
[20] Sam Rainsy, indicted in his absence for fraud in the last election, was sentenced to an 18-month prison term in December 2005.

   This represents another common international theme – namely, that the difficulty of promoting human rights as they are understood within the liberal peace thesis is due not just to the inability of the internationals or the government to provide for human rights but also to the relative lack of demand (though, of course, there are an increasing number of local organizations advocating for human rights, as noted above). An international perspective indicates these dynamics arise because of a lack of education, but also ascribes them to a local elite or even cultural mistrust of the role of the individual (Hughes & Conway, 2005: 28). This appears to support the hubristic belief, often inherent in liberal peacebuilding projects, that individuals lack the agency for reform: 'Cambodian society at the grassroots appears to lack established traditional organizational forms which might channel demands to the state' (Hughes & Conway, 2005: 28). These factors hinder the introduction of civil society, the rule of law and human rights as these are envisaged within the liberal peace framework. Indeed, the tension of this framework with what Hughes & Conway (2005: vii) describe as 'persistent themes of a discourse of power which is profoundly incompatible with the principles of democracy and human rights' once again indicates the highly politicized and interventionary – and therefore virtual – nature of the liberal peace, which may ultimately empower elites over citizens, their rights and laws.

Economic Liberalization

Have free and globalized markets and neoliberal development taken root in Cambodia? Once again, the picture is not encouraging. According to the Economic Institute of Cambodia (EIC), the annual growth rate of the economy (GDP) for 2005–06 is expected to be around 5%. This is down from 7.7% in 2004 and 5.2% in 2002. Inflation is at 7% compared to 2004. The exchange rate of the riel against the US dollar has also been weakened by an economic slowdown in rural areas. This is not helped by worsening heath statistics. There seems to be a steady growth of the poverty rate. Some 36% of the population were living on or below US $1 per day in 1997, 39.4% in 2000, and 42.4% in 2004 – the most recent figure (which amounts to approximately 6 million people out of a population of 13 million) (EIC, 2005b: ix). According to UNDP statistics, 78% of the Cambodian population live on less than US $2 per day. This rates Cambodia at no. 81 (out of 103) on the Human Poverty Index (HPI), making it the worst performer in East Asia and the Pacific (UNDP, 2003: 22). According to UNICEF, the child mortality rate is also increasing: children under the age of five die at a rate of 141 per 1,000 (2004), compared to 115 in 1990. Infant mortality was 97 per 1,000 in 2004, compared

with 80 in 1990.[21] The average life expectancy stood at 57.4 years in 2001. These disturbing statistics rate Cambodia at no. 130 out of 177 on the UN Human Development Index (HDI), ranking it second-lowest in Southeast Asia as a least developed country (UNDP, 2005).

Since 1993, Cambodia has been the recipient of foreign aid totalling over US $5.66 billion. As the EIC (2005c: 34) suggests, 'these assistances have greatly contributed to the reconstruction of Cambodia, boosting economic growth, financing trade and budget deficits and, to some extend, to alleviating poverty'. Nevertheless, economic prosperity in Cambodia is still far from a reality, and criticism for this has been directed at the donor community, neoliberal policy, the government and local elites. The EIC suggests that the simple reason for the lack of high economic growth is the absence of an automatic mechanism to ensure simultaneous growth and poverty reduction. As a result, it and other institutions such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund have recommended extensive structural reforms (World Bank, 2004: 3). Once again, these are dependent on the willingness of the government. Criticism has also been levelled at the international community, especially in relation to the emphasis of investment, which the EIC suggests should be focused more on agricultural development, health care, education and fundamental infrastructure. It has also been pointed out that the financial aid entering the country often goes directly to pay the salaries of foreign advisers and technical specialists (EIC, 2005c: 35). These dynamics indicate either that neoliberalism has not been effective or that it has had very dangerous unintended consequences.

In addition, UNTAC has not escaped criticism for having a retrogressive effect on the fragile economy, which paradoxically it was created to strengthen. As Berdal & Leifer (1996: 53) argue, 'the UNTAC presence was economically and socially destabilizing because it fuelled an artificial boom and generated massive inflation'. Kato also identifies the 'distortionary effects' of UNTAC, and suggests that the economic effect of the mission was to make some Cambodians very rich, but many more suffered a fall in their standard of living, owing to insecurity and inflation (Kato, 1997: 202). A further social consequence of UNTAC was the artificial boom created by the relative wealth of its staff.

Almost all observers of the current Cambodian economy identify a concerning growth in the gap between the rich and poor (EIC, 2005a: 15). Peou (2005: 116) suggests that this is a 'consequence of liberalization without adequate state intervention or protection'. They also point to the functioning of an 'informal' economy that is neither controlled by, nor contributes to, the development of the state. Furthermore, there is a lack of unemployment figures available for the Cambodian economy, suggesting a widely accepted

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[21] See www.unicef.org/infobycountry/cambodia_statistics.

international understanding that it is a subsistence economy,[22] and therefore that Western (neoliberal) forms of measurement are irrelevant. World Bank officials estimate that 85% of the population still subsist on small strips of land (thus providing for their own welfare), ironically distributed by the Khmer Rouge in an attempt to end feudal land ownership, even after over a decade of development initiatives.[23] Yet, subsistence is also seen as gainful, even though the neoliberal development model engendered in the liberal peace would define subsistence as poverty.

According to the World Bank, Cambodian society has no indigenous economic networks and fails both to provide and to build economic capacity.[24] This is perhaps an overly negative assessment of the Cambodian economic situation, but it is one that fits the neoliberal view that where no system apparently exists one needs to be provided. Certainly, the banking system mainly deals with elites and has no lending facilities beyond them, and the tax system favours the rich.[25] Capital flight affects most businesses, as does the country's archaic tariff system. Also, a large proportion of aid is spent on technical assistance.[26] Indeed, it could be said that neoliberal reform as part of the liberal peace framework has reified elite control of power and resources, thus undermining the other components of the liberal peace, such as democratization, the rule of law and human rights.

There is, of course, a functioning informal economy. Although this provides no direct or accountable revenues to the government through taxation, it generates corruption and patronage, which runs counter to the liberal peace:

> the disparity between the importance and effectiveness of informal networks and the weakness and effectiveness of state institutions is mirrored, and to a great extent propelled, by the disparity in the level of rewards that can be reaped from rent-seeking and the levels of public salaries (Hughes & Conway, 2005: 42).

International actors, donors and lenders do not regard the informal economy as a basis for a neoliberal economy for these reasons. Yet, the embrace of a free market after 1989 also 'opened the door to dramatic levels of corruption and a very low level of effective control over state officials by the centre' (Hughes & Conway, 2005: viii). This lack of capacity may in fact also be partly responsible for the stagnating economy and the growing disparity between socio-economic groups – themselves exacerbated by neoliberal policies rather than rectified by them. What seems to have emerged as a result of economic reform is a thin version of the neoliberal framework through which corrupt elites 'asset strip' the foreign resources brought in to support the building of the liberal peace, and use them instead to support clientelistic

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[22] UNDP official, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 8 November 2005.
[23] World Bank officials, personal interviews, Phnom Penh, 7–8 November 2005.
[24] World Bank officials, personal interviews, Phnom Penh, 7–8 November 2005.
[25] Sok Hach, Economic Institute of Cambodia, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 11 November 2005.
[26] Sok Hach, Economic Institute of Cambodia, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 11 November 2005.

systems of hierarchy and patronage. As a result, the economic interaction between, development of and prospects for individuals at the grass-roots level have barely developed since the early 1990s. What is even more notable is a general resistance on the part of international actors to admit deficiencies in their approaches.

This raises the question of whether subsistence and indeed corruption are tolerated as the price of a transition towards a neoliberal economy, or indeed caused by this. Yet, these represent key reasons why a liberal economy is emerging only very slowly. This means the government is unable to raise significant taxes or loans, or attract foreign direct investment, and so remains dependent upon the international community and donors. A partial reform syndrome has emerged as a result (Van der Walle, Ball & Ramachandran, 2003), to which the international community turns a blind eye, arguing that even relative illiberalism can lead eventually to (neo-)liberalism as the terms of the liberal peace are gradually internalized. At least partially, the economic aspects of the liberal peace are virtual, directed externally and from the top down. Where elite cooperation is limited, little can be done by the international community other than to continue to try to impose conditionality, occasionally turn a blind eye to any deviation, and await the 'inevitability' of the internalization of the liberal peace it craves. Though some have benefited so far, the model effectively offers little other than hope for the vast majority of the population.

Conclusion: Liberal Hubris and a Virtual Peace

Clearly, the international community's faith in the ability of the components of the liberal peace to take root and produce a stable and sustainable polity has not yet borne fruit. This faith in the liberal peace as a blueprint for stability and sustainability appears in this case to be misplaced and hubristic. If the objective has been to create an orthodox version of the liberal peace offering the future possibility of a more emancipatory version, the situation in Cambodia after more than a decade suggests that a conservative version of the liberal peace is all that has been achieved. Yet, even this is virtual, simply acting as a superficial overlay and mainly recognizable to the internationals still present. It has made relatively little impact upon the indigenous polity, its components and citizens.

The liberal peace is a Western linear concept that relies upon progress along a set or pre-ordained path: Fukuyama (2004: 56) calls this 'getting to Denmark'. Dynamics associated with local configurations of power, knowledge, resources and institutions are unaccounted for by this rather naïve teleology offered by liberal peacebuilding, which automatically assumes it

carries the technical and normative legitimacy to overcome such social, economic and political structures and obstacles.

Yet, Cambodia has had elections and it has an established government (though neither operates in the manner expected by internationals). Civil society is also developing, albeit greatly aided by the internationals and the NGO community. Human rights, perhaps not protected and guaranteed in a format recognized by the liberal peace, are emerging. Similarly, the informal economy is a functioning free market and the germ of capitalism is flourishing on Phnom Penh's streets. Ultimately, a form of peace exists that incorporates components of the liberal peace modified by the local context and the conceptual and pragmatic failings within the liberal peace and its epistemic community of peacebuilders. However, given that this is one of the longest-standing post-Cold War peacebuilding 'experiments', international actors would have expected a move towards an orthodox or more emancipatory liberal peace.

Fundamental problems exist in reconciling the Cambodian situation to the orthodox liberal peace model for the vast majority of its population, even after a decade or more of liberal peacebuilding. It may be convenient for internationals to assume that there will be a linear progress to an ever more sophisticated version of the liberal peace, but the Cambodian case illustrates the deep intellectual and practical hubris of such an approach, on political, social, economic and cultural grounds. This is not to say that conditions have not improved, or that the liberal peace has failed conclusively, but it does indicate that there are deep-rooted issues, factors and dynamics that have not yet been fully engaged with by international actors in the very areas where they have been working since 1989 – both in terms of the praxis of liberal statebuilding, which when set in the Cambodian context seems naïvely optimistic, and in terms of the dynamics of its local context. Though strategic security is much improved, this context is still dominated by the survival of the notion of political power as a zero-sum game and by a weak democratic process. The balance sheet shows limited progress other than in the area of strategic security, though of course the reforms enacted still offer the possibility of future improvement. The lessons from Cambodia seem to be that liberal peacebuilding either may take much longer to install than generally believed by international actors or, more negatively, is conceptually flawed or locally unsuited.

The asset of what is essentially a virtual liberal peace from the perspective of pragmatic international peacebuilders is that it allows for international intervention, conditionality and dependency creation to be deployed to establish the governance frameworks of a recognizably liberal state from the perspective of the international community. From a more critical perspective, this is deeply flawed, because it legitimates the imposition of external norms and defers executive and administrative functions, as well as focusing on

top-down institutions than have limited short- and medium-term impact on citizens' lives. It allows for the coexistence of democracy and semi-feudalism, free-market reform, corruption and a subsistence economy, the establishment of human rights and the rule of law, and the unaccountability of elites and, of course, international peacebuilders. This virtual liberal peace hybrid indicates a superficial overlay of the liberal governance of politics, economy and society controlled by internationally induced conditionality and dependency, above local indigenous norms, culture and tradition in both negative and positive forms.[27]

After over a decade, the 'liberal experiment' in Cambodia is open to the accusation of being both ineffective and unaccountable. This necessitates a much more reflective international role in peacebuilding and, in particular, a more reflective relationship of the full range of peacebuilding actors with local actors (and not just elite actors). This also necessitates a greater engagement with the critique of the liberal peace outlined in this article if is to avoid the accusation of being a virtual front that defers local democracy, the rule of law, civil society, human rights, prosperity and development for some mythical liberal future.

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[27] See Chen Vannath, Director, Centre for Social Development, personal interview, Phnom Penh, 7 November 2005; World Bank officials, personal interviews, Phnom Penh, 7–8 November 2005.

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