**Intensifying political geographies of authoritarianism:
 Towards an anti-geopolitics of garment worker struggles in neoliberal Cambodia**

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**Abstract**

Cambodia’s recent ‘crackdown’ on freedoms of expression, association and assembly coincides with the wider geopolitical ascent of illiberal democracy. Scholarly and public discourse suggests we are now witnessing a global authoritarian turn, possibly linked to the current conditions of late neoliberal capitalist development where deprivations linked to state ‘roll back’ have engendered a corrective state ‘roll out’. The language of the global authoritarian turn, however, echoes earlier unhelpful and totalising readings of neoliberal expansion as a process of ‘top-down’ diffusion. To counter this, this paper argues for a re-centring of local geographies in understanding authoritarian neoliberalism and a renewed focus on the bottom-up dynamics of its articulation in specific contexts. Drawing from a detailed study of garment worker activism, this article unravels the two-way relationship that unfolds between the intensified experiences of capital and resistance in Cambodia, and the intensifying political geography of authoritarianism that reverberates as a result. Forwarding an anti-geopolitical reading of authoritarian neoliberalism in Cambodia, the paper recasts the current crisis underway in Cambodia, disrupting the notion of an authoritarian ‘turn’. Rather than the top-down imposition of a new model of autocratic government, the crackdown is shown to represent an intensification of existing authoritarian neoliberalism provoked by geopolitics from below. Here, intensification reflects a demographic and spatial shift in the concentration of authoritarian strategies towards Cambodia’s garment workers.

Key words: *anti-geopolitics, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, resistance, Cambodia*

**Introduction**

In September 2018, the European Parliament tabled a debate on the aggravated human rights situation in Cambodia. It later announced a decision to revoke Cambodia’s inclusion in the EU’s Everything But Arms trade agreement (EBA). The EBA, introduced in 2010 to promote economic growth in the world’s Least Developed Countries, grants Cambodia and 48 other beneficiary states tariff-free imports to the EU market, as the name suggests, on every product except arms. Yet this access comes with one, albeit significant, catch: binding beneficiaries to uphold fundamental human and labour rights conventions.

It is not hard to parse where the Cambodian government (hereafter Royal Government of Cambodia, or RGC) has breached the EBA’s conditions. Its transgressions include a full-frontal assault on freedoms of expression, association and assembly; a nuclear response to electoral decline in national and local polls in 2013 and 2017 giving rise to fear of losing power at upcoming elections in 2018. Encompassing the shuttering of independent newspapers and radio stations, lethal dispersal of protest, and increased surveillance of civil society, the so-called ‘crackdown’ peaked in September 2017 with the imprisonment of the opposition party leader, Kem Sokha, before the ultimate dissolution of the opposition party itself two months later. Without a credible opponent on ballots, the incumbent RGC swept to victory at national polls held in July 2018: a 77% share of the vote delivering an unprecedented clean sweep of all 125 seats on offer in the National Assembly.

The RGC’s alacrity has caught international observers like the EU and UN – also voicing concern about Cambodia’s political dynamics (United Nations 2018) – off-guard. Following decades of conflict ending in the 1990s, both entities invested vast resources to direct Cambodia’s ‘triple transition’ (Hughes 2003; Springer 2009): from war to peace; authoritarianism to democracy; planned to free-market economy. So hegemonic is the belief in the self-reinforcing complementarity of these facets of liberal progress, that celebration of Cambodia’s macroeconomic ‘miracle’ (World Bank 2018) has eclipsed scrutiny of the ‘kleptocracy’ (Springer 2009a) that plunders, profits and dispossesses beneath the veneer of these plaudits. The RGC’s brazenness of late, however, has forced the EU and UN to wrestle with the discomforting question of why the supposedly interlinked trajectory of Cambodia’s economic and political transitions have instead diverged so markedly.

Here, Cambodia’s ‘descent into outright dictatorship’ (Cambodia Daily 2017) fits a wider trend within the geopolitical ascendance of the ‘illiberal order’ (Boyle 2016:35). Taking place from Poland to the Philippines, Brazil to Burma, the rise of ‘illiberal democracy’ (Zakaria 1997) and other right-wing populisms has led to suggestions of a ‘global authoritarian turn’ (Handel and Dayan 2017:471; Magalhães 2019:402). Critical scholarship hypothesises that this global turn is linked to the conditions of late neoliberal capitalist development, where the deprivation caused by state ‘rollback’ is linked to an uplift in resistance and wave of state ‘rollout’ to contain it (Peck and Theodore 2019).

The extent of this shift is certainly troublesome, warranting careful scrutiny of more general antecedents. Nevertheless, the globalist language that pervades the debate on the unfolding of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019), as it has been labelled, echoes earlier unhelpful and totalising readings of neoliberal expansion as a process of top-down diffusion. In doing so, it threatens to undermine work by geographers that emphasises the pluralism of neoliberal development. Instead, authoritarian neoliberalism, akin to its antecedents, must be hybrid, variegated: responsive to local geographies as they articulate in place.

Seeking to underscore the everyday locus of these processes, this paper trains a lens on the role of lay workers in shaping Cambodia’s authoritarian ‘turn’. In doing so, I consider the dialectical relationship between authoritarianism and neoliberalism in Cambodia. Whilst acknowledging that Cambodia’s experience is imbricated in a broader set of political and economic processes, in this paper I bring together insights from a decade of research in country to emphasise how these are locally mediated and contextually (re)produced. Focusing on garment worker activism, in particular, I frame labour struggles as a form of ‘anti-geopolitics’ (Routledge 2003) that both challenges and is challenged by the Cambodian neoliberal state. Unpacking the reciprocal dynamics of these confrontations, therefore, I present a located and grounded understanding of authoritarian rollout.

In developing this account, I draw principally on a series of over 100 interviews and observations with garment workers, trade unionists, labour rights advocates and employer associations conducted in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, between October 2017 and April 2018. Informed by previous research on working life (Lawreniuk and Parsons 2017; Parsons and Lawreniuk 2016; Parsons, Lawreniuk and Pilgrim 2014) and labour struggles (Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018) in the Cambodian garment sector, I visited these diverse stakeholders at their workplaces, homes, offices, and sites of activism in order to learn more about the micro-geography of labour organising and how this has dovetailed with national politics, becoming embroiled in tussles with the state. Taking place at the height of the ‘crackdown’ in a tense civil society atmosphere steeped in surveillance and fear[[1]](#footnote-1) (Schoenberger and Beban 2018), my past work, established networks, and lengthy association with Cambodia were all vital for building trust with respondents during fieldwork (Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018). Conversations took place in Khmer with the assistance of a native speaker. This original material is complemented here by a range of secondary source material collated through the crackdown, including electoral data, civil society reporting, news and social media, including the Prime Minister’s Facebook page.

The garment sector’s workforce assumes central focus of the study as the embodiment of the contradictions of Cambodia’s neoliberal development. On the one hand, rapid expansion of the garment industry has been a key driver of Cambodia’s economic boom. As foreign investment flooded to an economy structurally adjusted to be one of the most open in Asia (World Bank 2013), a handful of factories in the late 1990s has become more than 600 today (ILO 2018). The sector vaunts an export value of $8 billion annually (ILO 2018), directly contributing 16% of national GDP and employing almost 700 000 people (ILO 2018). Nonetheless, though industry wages are high relative to comparable occupations (Parsons, Pilgrim and Lawreniuk 2014), they remain below living wage levels. With factories concentrated in the capital of Phnom Penh, the predominantly rural population must migrate to the city for work. Here, twinned pressures of rural dispossession and urban inflation squeeze workers’ limited livelihoods – of whom 90% are women (CARE 2017). The compulsion to remit large chunks of their income – an average of 40% (CARE 2017) – to sustain family members in rural villages ensures that life in the sprawling factory enclaves along the city’s peripheries remains austere.

In this paper, however, I show that although marginalised Cambodia’s garment workers are not without voice. To the contrary, even as they inhabit capital’s crises, they have become one of Cambodia’s primary sites of resistance to this prescribed neoliberal austerity. A flourishing labour movement challenges the everyday injustices workers confront. Its success is reflected in its broad reach, with union membership extending to over 60% of those in the industry, the highest density of any sector in Asia (Nuon and Serrano 2010).

Unionism in Cambodia, however, is internally riven, with local branches grouped under national federations and confederations, split into three broad camps – pro-government, opposition-aligned and ostensibly independent. Reflecting the union movement’s complex origins in Cambodia, these splits are not entirely organic but have been in part fostered by the interventions of political parties and international organisations (Nuon and Serrano 2010). In what follows, limited by access constraints during my fieldwork, I present the experiences of activists from unions regarded as part of the opposition and independent factions. In general, those unions with links to the government are regarded as ‘much less militant, moderate and more cooperative to employers’ (Nuon and Serrano 2010:25) than others. However, vertical as well as horizontal divisions in the movement (Arnold 2017; Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018) leave grassroots factory branches often adrift from the organisational politics of national administrations, as shown below.

Despite these challenges, workers’ dense if disparate resistance in Cambodia has acquired the capacity to ‘jump scale’ (Tufts and Savage 2009; Merk 2009) from the cautious work of local, micro-scale organisation to national-level mobilisation. Indeed, at critical junctures, mass strikes and demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of workers acting largely ‘autonomous’ (Arnold 2017:30) from higher control, have threatened the very rule of Cambodia’s kleptocracy. Its defensive reaction has been to leverage existing tools of state repression to nullify this threat.

In presenting this account here, I unravel the two-way relationship that unfolds between the intensified experiences of capital and resistance in Cambodia, and the intensifying political geography of authoritarianism that reverberates as a result. Here. an anti-geopolitical reading of authoritarian neoliberalism in Cambodia allows for a re-reading of the current crisis underway in Cambodia. Rather than the top-down imposition of a new model of autocratic government resulting from a drift in Cambodia’s allegiances away from the EU and towards China, I argue the crackdown represents an intensification of existing authoritarian neoliberalism provoked by geopolitics from below.

Refuting monolithic readings of authoritarian neoliberalism, I respond to Bruff and Tansel’s call to ‘ﬂesh out how the processes that we associate with it manifest in concrete contexts’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019:236), using this anti-geopolitical analytic to contribute to the ‘articulation agenda’, linking Cambodia’s fluctuating internal dynamics and international alliances without privileging the latter. Here, I offer a nuanced reading that provides a more empirical basis to theorisations of authoritarian neoliberalism. Building on Springer’s (2009b; 2015) analysis of actually existing neoliberalism in Cambodia, I extend this frame in response to Peck and Theodore’s calls (2019:259, emphasis added) for a renewed focus on ‘actually existing *(late)* neoliberalism’, in light of the current crisis. Cambodia’s authoritarian ‘turn’, I show, is an intensification of authoritarian neoliberalism already in place: a demographic and spatial concentration around certain groups.

I begin by framing anti-geopolitics as a heuristic tool to unpick the entanglement of grassroots geographies with the wider dynamics of authoritarian neoliberal development. After, I briefly outline the key moments and events that constitute the standard narrative of Cambodia’s ‘crackdown’ and its uneasy suggestion of democratic rupture when placed in the longer lineage of Cambodian politics. Three empirical sections follow that develop an alternative, anti-geopolitics of this ostensible authoritarian ‘turn’. In the first, I explore the geography of Cambodia’s electoral dynamics, showing how garments workers created electoral upset as an unchecked constituency outside the informal dynamics of Cambodia’s ingrained system of patronage politics. The second section explores this electoral upset – and its violent aftermath – as the articulation of anti-geopolitics: a national crisis rooted in the micro-geography of garment worker organisation. The final empirical section outlines the RGC’s response to workers’ provocations: an intensifying authoritarianism, concentrated on garment workers and the suppression of their resistance. I finish with a discussion and conclusion to draw together the paper’s key findings and outline its contributions.

**Conceptualising intensifying political geographies of authoritarianism**

From Hungary’s Viktor Orbán to Poland’s Law and Justice Party, the ‘disturbing phenomenon’ of ‘illiberal democracy’ (Zakaria 1997:42) is on the rise in Europe. Developments in the global South, for whose experiences Zakaria originally coined the notion, also evidence these trends towards more autocratic forms of national governance. In Southeast Asia alone, recent years have brought military rule in Thailand, the rise of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and the expulsion of the Rohingya minority under Aung San Su Chi’s steer of Myanmar. The international scope and extent of these trends has provoked suggestions both within the academic literature and popular discourse that we are now witnessing a ‘global authoritarian turn’ (Handel and Dayan 2017; Magalhães 2019).

This shift shatters the ‘end-of-history liberal democratic idyll’ (Swyngedouw 2019:271) that propels the expansion of neoliberal governance, where increasing global integration under the “free” market is purported to create ‘more jobs, higher income and greater equality of opportunity’ (Swyngedouw 2019:269). Instead, combined, uneven and intensifying neoliberalisation has wrought increased polarisation and exclusion manifest across scales, now coupled with autocratic state interventions and imposed austerity.

Accordingly, how to account for, and respond to, the ascendancy of authoritarian politics in our neoliberal era has become the subject of intense scholarly debate (McCarthy 2019; Bruff and Tansel 2019; Peck and Theodore 2019). Here, economic geographers have been at the forefront of efforts in an emerging literature unpacking apparent oxymoron of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff 2014). In their introduction to a recent special issue on ‘neoliberalism’s authoritarian (re)turns’, for example, Peck and Theodore (2019:249) describe the ‘unapologetic mutation of late neoliberalism’ with a ‘yet more brutal face’ following the financial crash of 2008. Given the traditional associations of neoliberalism as form of state rollback, they question whether this latterly variant still warrants the term or whether recent events are better theorised as some form of ‘repudiation’, ‘retreat’ or ‘end’ to neoliberalism (Peck and Theodore 2019:246).

Such a mutation, however, was foreshadowed in earlier work by the same authors that has long refuted the dogged misconception of neoliberalisation as a shrinkage of the national state. Almost two decades earlier, they flag the possibility that autocratic tendencies inhere within the neoliberal project: ‘a process, not an end-state’ that ‘tends to provoke countertendencies’ (Peck and Tickell 2002:383). Here, state rollback to institute the external conditions for neoliberalism may necessitate a double movement of state rollout to correct the internal contradictions borne of it, in the form of penal policymaking to contain dissent of those disadvantaged by earlier reform. Thus, write Peck and Theodore elsewhere (2012:182), we might remain mindful ‘of whether late neoliberalism is historically prone to some kind of penal or authoritarian turn-cum-trajectory’.

Both in this and the language of the ‘global authoritarian turn’ (Handel and Dayan 2017; Magalhães 2019), however, is a creep towards historicising grand narrative that, if left unchecked, threatens to undermine theorisation of neoliberalism by the same authors as a place-specific rather than universalising phenomenon. The notion of the rise of authoritarianism as a global event, intrinsic to the spread of late neoliberal development, is – as Peck and Theodore (2019: 246) caution in their latest intervention – counter to nuanced established insight that insists that ‘sociospatial difference is a characteristic of the conflicted “insides” of neoliberalism’ and ‘its invocation should never be an occasion for explanatory or political foreclosure, but an invitation to conjunctural analysis, sensitive to variable (local) projects, formations, struggles, and contestations’. Bruff and Tansel (2019:236) note, too, in the introduction to their own special issue on authoritarian neoliberalism, that there exists an unease with the concept as redolent of ‘a top-down approach which neglects everyday life and the possibilities for grassroots change’. In response, they call for work that elaborates how ‘social struggles and various forms of resistance shape the manifestations of authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019:234).

At the same time, however, Tansel (2019) has counselled that explanation should not be over-reliant on internal antagonisms and, instead, there is a need to bring international actors back into understandings of the dynamics of authoritarian neoliberalism. In the South, he argues, the trajectories of both democratisation and neoliberalisation remain ‘ultimately tied to the broader regional and global dynamics that shape the states’ and social forces’ spaces of manoeuvre’ (Tansel 2019:299). Here, Tansel (2019:298) points principally to Western governments’ preference for stability over social change in key regions as ‘incubating’ and ‘propping up’ non-democratic regimes, but also nods to the rise of the BRICs countries as global donors and their unconcern with liberal ideology. This ties to Peck and Theodore’s (2019:247) reiteration of the ‘more-than-local form(ation) of neoliberalism’, always ‘tethered to multisite processes of emulation and experimentation, such that there is always a (wider) context to each (local) context’. In this paper, therefore, I look to account for the interplay of both internal and international dynamics in a way that does not privilege the latter and, in doing so, provides an apt framework for promoting ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ readings of authoritarian neoliberal shifts.

This is a subtle lacuna, given scholarship on the contemporary articulation of neoliberalism and authoritarianism continues to highlight the importance of local geographies in mediating political economic circumstances to produce localised transformations. Nevertheless, its importance lies in spotlighting locality beyond elite actors. Springer’s (2009a; 2015) work on articulated neoliberalism in Cambodia, for example, emphasises how national politico-business elites co-opt neoliberal development policy mandated by international financial institutions for their own ends, resulting in ‘neoliberalism with Cambodian characteristics’ (Springer 2009a:2565). Likewise, Koch (2012) and Svolik’s (2012) respective writing on authoritarian states elsewhere both position rulers’ tactics of coercion and consent as localised and agentive, responsive to perceptions of varied threats to power.

Whilst these works show how the broader logic of authoritarian neoliberalism diffuses unevenly in differing contexts, emphasising the agency of local actors, both also reproduce a tendency of privileging the agency of certain classes. Indeed, in these accounts it is local elites who retain power to bend international forces and shape local circumstances (Koopman 2011; Routledge 2003). As a result, neither perspective quite offers an apt counterbalance to top-down notions of authoritarian neoliberal development, since theorisation beyond interactions at the scale of the national governance remains incomplete.

In contrast, critical geopolitical readings of neoliberalism have progressed understanding of how neoliberal articulation occurs at a micro scale. Here, ‘discourse analysis has allowed scholars to appreciate the internalisation of neoliberal logics at various institutional and even individual or embodied scales’ (Springer 2016:60). This work has foregrounded the role of governmentality in mobilising discourse and manufacturing consent for neoliberalism through neoliberal subject formation. As such, however, it is less useful for fleshing out understanding of the dialectic between authoritarianism and neoliberalism, which hinges not on the question of consent but resistance; the double movement to control those bodies and groups ‘pushing back against hegemonic policies of (in)security’ (Koopman 2011:277). Indeed, within this critical geopolitical framing there still exists a conceptual unilinearity, which renders neoliberalism a force that ‘trickles down scale’ and is ‘mapped onto lives and bodies’ (Christian, Dowler and Cuomo 2017:66). In other words, still ‘understating rebellion and overemphasising statemanship’ (Routledge 2003:236).

Instead, I look to work on ‘anti-geopolitics’ to overcome this binary, with an ontology that stresses a more dynamic relationship between processes occurring at different scales. Developed by Routledge (2003), the concept of anti-geopolitics focuses on counter-hegemonic struggle waged from outside the traditional positions and locations associated with geopolitics: beyond sites of political, economic, and cultural power and prestige. Instead, anti-geopolitics looks to tell alternative stories that ‘frame history from the perspective of those who have engaged in resistance to the state’ (Routledge 2003:236). These histories constitute a ‘“geopolitics from below” emanating from subaltern (i.e. dominated) positions within society that challenge the… hegemony of the state and its elites’ (Routledge 2003:236). As Brickell (2014) has shown in Cambodia, for example, where neoliberal reforms challenge micro securities they engender dissent with the potential to ‘jump scale’, provoking a reshaping of macro conditions. It is such a reading of geopolitics, where the ‘everyday speaks back and changes seemingly immutable forces’ (Koopman 2011:276) that I look to here to unpack the relations between state rollback and rollout, and the multiscalar reverberations of this shift in the international arena, elaborating the contingent effects produced in cases ‘where the social body does not come to accept the supposed wisdom of neoliberalism’ (Springer 2016:60). This anti-geopolitics lens offers the emergent literature on authoritarian neoliberalism a means to place the influence of grassroots struggles within late capitalist trajectories in a manner that attends to both local and more-than-local formations in a non-hierarchic manner.

In framing Cambodian female worker’s activism as a form of anti-geopolitics, I build on a long tradition of scholarship that emphasises the gendered agency and resistance of labour in global capitalism, such as Ong (2010) and Wright (2013). However, I also extend this work by locating worker’s struggles in the wider context of national and international political contestation.

**The Cambodian crackdown: ‘Descent into outright dictatorship’?**

‘Descent into outright dictatorship’ summarised the *Cambodia Daily* newspaper following the midnight arrest of Cambodia’s opposition party leader, Kem Sokha, in September 2017. Global media and international governments were quick to agree that the RGC’s 2017 ‘crackdown’ on the free press and political challengers represented the death of liberal Cambodia. However, as others have observed, the 30-year reign of ‘Cambodia’s ruler, Hun Sen—currently the longest-serving Prime Minister in the world… complicates the story of a *recent* turn to populist authoritarianism’ (Schoenberger, Beban and Lamb 2018:3, emphasis in original). Indeed, viewing contemporary events in the wider frame of this self-proclaimed strongman’s lengthy tenure reveals Cambodia’s democratic transition has always been complex.

Certainly, recent years have seen a change in outward approach. Dealt a hard lesson by ‘apparent unpreparedness’ (Hughes 2015:2) and resulting diminished seats in the 2013 elections, the RGC followed up from 2014 with a concerted effort to bring the political landscape back under its control. A wave of hostile legislation sought to curb freedoms of expression, association and assembly, closing avenues of dissent open to citizens. Many NGOs and other CSOs, including trade unions and labour rights groups, were named as conspirators in what the RGC identified as the opposition’s ‘colour revolution’: an alleged coup led by foreign ‘superpowers’ to ‘invade without using armed forces under the pretext of democracy and human rights’ (Dara and Chen 2018).

As the crackdown intensified, CSOs were subjected to onerous reporting and restrictions; protests, demonstrations and public gatherings were banned; independent media was shuttered; human rights activists were arrested and detained; and the RGC stepped up monitoring of online and public space. When local elections in 2017 suggested the crackdown had failed to dent the opposition’s appeal, the party itself was dissolved by the Supreme Court. Of its joint leaders, one, Sam Rainsy, is currently in exile and the second, Kem Sokha, remains under house arrest in Phnom Penh.

Whilst inviting to regard 2013 as a watershed that marked the switch from democratic to authoritarian rule, to carve Cambodia’s political trajectory into pre-2013 and post-2013 eras elides the continuities that link the two. Indeed, as Hughes (2015:1) shows, the 2013 election ‘was not particularly unusual’ compared with previous national polls. Hostilities and post-election wrangling between parties have surfaced at most elections since their restoration in 1993, an early indication of the misplaced hubris of the international brokers of Cambodia’s liberal transition. Indeed, Hun Sen’s hold on power remains only because of his refusal to accept that year’s result, negotiating the dissonant title of co-prime minister despite defeat in the polls – then ousting his counterpart by force four years later (Strangio 2014). Thus, the 1993 election was, at best, the inauspicious birth of a curiously illiberal democracy; the ballot box appropriated as a tool of political theatre.

In this respect, the electoral cycle has typically been the rhythm to which the waxing and waning of Cambodia’s democratic aspirations have been synced. Here, authoritarian control tightens during election seasons, only to loosen once results have been returned. In this way, the RGC appears to tread a pathway between donor demands for liberal development and its own concern for the continued restitution of its command. Nonetheless, though this careful cat and mouse game has tended to placate the former by allowing Hun Sen to cultivate an image of ongoing liberal reform and democratisation, his power has consolidated over time; weighted moves of two steps forward and one step back enabling encroachment ‘toward de facto one-party rule’ (Strangio 2014).

Yet, though the behaviour of Hun Sen and his government has remained broadly the same over their decades of rule, something has altered in recent years. The political changes underway in Cambodia are more than a contestation between Hun Sen and his perennial political foe, Sam Rainsy. Instead, demographic, economic and social change is shaping new political forces in Cambodia, including, in 2013, an emerging assemblage that rocked Cambodian politics from the margins of society: garment workers. The apparently mundane problems of this workforce ceased to be the purview merely of factory forecourts but were elevated to a national issue, presented with vigour to Cambodia’s most powerful of men, as what follows shows.

Events since evidence a reframing of the RGC’s long-standing authoritarian tendencies, oriented around these workers who most intensively both embody and resist its ‘kleptocratic’ variant of neoliberal governance (Springer 2009a). Moreover, as the following sections will show, this process is intertwined with Cambodia’s development and the progressive intensification of capital in the Kingdom’s urban areas. Far from being two separate, or even antithetical, dimensions of the Cambodian story since 1993, neoliberalism and authoritarianism have thrived symbiotically.

**Between rural and urban: The translocal politics of garment worker resistance**

The growing power of this youthful, mostly female, workforce caught some by surprise. Yet global precedent suggests it should not have. Whilst a popular imaginary, stereotypes of women workers passively caught in the strictures of global capital do a crude disservice to their agency where they are read only as victims of economic forces, lacking capacity to effect change. Indeed, in Cambodia, women worker’s actions are central to understanding the 2013 national election and its aftermath. These events can be traced to this emerging demographic through everyday articulations of economic processes that have – apparently unbeknownst to the RGC – shifted the ground under their feet during their quarter century of power. In essence, the garment workforce’s growth has subverted a system of authoritarian rule rooted firmly in the rural-urban divide by creating a constituency that sits outside the political template in place since the 1980s.

In this template, a central axis of the RGC’s power derives from rural patronage. Deploying complementary tactics of coercion and consent, the RGC entrusts and rewards village-level leaders to maintain social control through tight relationships with village members, simultaneously enabling surveillance and cultivating loyalties through the widespread practice of gift-giving. In doing so, the party forges ‘an elaborate system of mass patronage and mobilization’ (Schoenberger, Beban and Lamb 2018:3); a ‘fraught politics of loyalty, obligation, reward and exclusion… in which insiders are well rewarded and outsiders are marginalised and, often, punished’ (Hughes 2015:5).

Such a strategy, however, was adapted to the rural-agricultural foundations of Cambodia’s earlier post-war society, aimed at bolstering the RGC’s ‘primary appeal to the rural masses’ (McCargo 2005:99) who have ‘long been the most consistent and reliable supporters of Hun Sen’s government’ (Schoenberger, Beban and Lamb 2018:3). This appeal is written thickly through the party’s symbolism and activities: its logo, an angel spreading flowers, is framed by the depiction of two ricestalks bending to form the outline of a buffalo’s horn.

However, these tactics have not carried well to peri-urban factory enclaves hallmarked by the widespread absence of state authorities or public services. Bypassed by the self-appointed ‘party that “gets thing done”’ (Hughes, 2006:476), workers describe themselves as beyond the relations of dependence and obligation that structure rural livelihoods and lifestyles. ‘We don’t want to expect too much from our government’, explained one worker, ‘because if we expect too much they will disappoint us’ (Davy, 33, female worker, 31/10/17). In this relative void of formal networks and authority, the independent trade union movement permeated and expanded to occupy civil space. Union leaders remain bullish about their capacities – ‘back in 2012, our union was very active in solving all the problems. Even small or big, we will solve it’ (Ratana, 38, male branch leader, 07/02/18) – and workers gratefully acknowledge their assistance. Thus, for urban workers, it is trade unions and not the RGC who ‘get things done’.

Where the RGC failed to adapt to these social changes accompanying Cambodia’s economic transition, leaders of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party [CNRP] have long been attuned to their potential. Their 2013 electoral campaign appealed directly to workers’ interests though a populist manifesto promising an improved minimum wage; state pensions and healthcare; and reduced prices for basic goods like food, fuel and electricity (CNRP 2014). Such offerings tapped into the momentum that the small-scale activities of local garment unions had built and which, as the mass multi-sectoral strikes in aftermath of the election proved, has begun to spill over into demands for recognition, protection and rights from other industries (Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018).

The CNRP’s ability to resonate with workers’ aspirations stems from its historic affiliations to trade unions. The party’s leader, Sam Rainsy, was a key figure in several unions’ formation (Nuon and Serrano 2010). Such linkages have helped the opposition locate an alternative political identity and ready ally in Cambodia’s mobile working classes. The 2013 election was then, in some part, the revenge of these forgotten workers. The opposition pulled off its biggest shocks not just in Phnom Penh, where most factory jobs are located, but in the surrounding rural provinces where most workers originate from - and frequently return home to vote to (Fig. 1).

**Figure 1. CNRP vote share in 2013 and share of garment workforce, by province**

[INSERT HERE]

**Intensifying resistance: Workers’ struggles as geopolitics from below**

However, to view this political upheaval as the result purely of macroeconomic processes is to misrepresent its fundamental character. This was a battle fought on the smallest scale: in homes, rented rooms and union offices. In particular, it has involved a shift in the gendered concept of the worker and her power, from a cultural norm of compliance and submission enacted in the liminal space between childhood and marriage (Derks 2008) towards a solidarity rooted in mutual strength and national responsibility.

Indeed, far from compliant, women workers in Cambodia have joined forces in huge numbers to cast off the shackles of these stereotypes. If employers expected or hoped to meet with the ‘docile’ and ‘nimble-fingered’ stereotypes (Mills 2005) that such narratives suggest – a pliant workforce unable to resist their subjugation – then they have been disappointed. Instead, Cambodia’s workers have refused to accept the Hobson’s choice offered to them: between the rock of sweatshop conditions and poverty pay, and the hard place of rural dispossession. As Sophea, a female unionist explains:

Everyone says that traditionally women are not brave enough to become union representatives but I think that it is not fair to say that. I can see in the factory already we have women who work as representatives… I am now considering becoming a representative. I am taking some space to think about that. I want to improve myself, challenge myself and help those who follow me. As a representative, if we succeed then others succeed. (Sophea, 33, female union member, 05/02/18)

Key to understanding workers’ resistance is the scale at which it manifests. Though inherently political, this was a national movement directed towards the smallest of victories. Chetna, a branch level union leader and her colleagues, for instance, showed a ring binder of grievances upon which the union was working:

‘The example in this picture is that this woman is wearing this style of shirt. The boss says we cannot wear this kind, because we may put something under it to steal it from the factory… He says, “If you want to work here, you must take it off. If you want to wear it, you don’t work here”. For us, we want to wear loose clothes to the factory because it is more comfortable’ (Chetna, 43, female branch leader, 25/01/18).

Other working practices that Chetna and her colleagues criticised included restrictive toilet breaks and a lack of privacy during them; fingerprint scanners that monitor breaks, exacting automatic pay deductions for unpunctuality; a particular supervisor who used abusive language to reprimand workers. Pervasive yet rooted in local instances of workplace control and discipline, it was with reference to similar issues that workers throughout the sampled sites described their motivations for forming, joining, supporting, and leading local union branches.

Moreover, the work of these factory-level union branches is conducted, for the most part, at a similar micro-scale. Here, local branches are structured in hierarchies, where an elected branch president and two deputies are assisted by appointed ‘activists’, who raise awareness of the union’s presence among their shop floor colleagues. Though leaders can escalate grievances upwards for legal analysis and advice from national level officers where necessary, most of the work of negotiation and resolution in factory-level disputes is carried out by local organisers. The success or stagnation of a branch depends on local leaders’ and activists’ willingness and ability ‘to sacrifice time and benefit’, as one deputy (Lina, 38, female branch representative, 20/02/18) put it: ‘you commit yourself, your mind must always be in the job. You cannot separate this job from yourself’.

Reflecting the personal nature of union association, this is a movement enacted in the most micro of spaces. As union presence in the factory is rarely welcomed and only sometimes tolerated by employers, the local branch relies on the intimate refuge of home to carry out organising work, away from the prying eyes of factory administrators and management. During fieldwork, unionists regularly invited me back to their rented rooms to talk after finishing shifts in the factory. These small concrete rooms, 10 metres square, are repurposed on evenings and weekends to act as education centres and organising spaces. ‘My house could accommodate about 10 to 15 people’, explained Thida, a branch leader in Kandal. Without available alternatives, it is here that she and others must invite their colleagues about ‘twice a month… to train our members about their freedoms to claims rights and benefits’ (Thida, 35, female branch leader, 06/03/18).

Over the years, however, this local organisation has proven a catalyst enabling workers’ resistance to ‘jump scale’. Speaking proudly of her work training local branch members from her home, for example, Thida described the changed attitudes and dispositions of a colleague attending these informal sessions:

Back then, she had no courage to talk back to the owner and supervisor when they asked her to do overtime. But after she had help from me, we taught her it is against the law. Now she knows that a woman should not stay calm or silent, or she will not get fair working conditions. The employer will abuse them. (Thida, 35, female branch leader, 06/03/18)

Here, experiences of factory-level activity have reshaped workers’ knowledge of the topographies of power within the factory space and broader system of production. In doing so, once ‘nimble fingers’ have become ‘raised fists’ (Mills 2005), sharpening workers’ capacity to critically evaluate injustices and stimulating workers’ appetite to agitate. As Thida continued, local activity helps workers feel emboldened and rethink their subordinate status in the workplace, challenging conventional understanding of the factory hierarchy:

Actually, our workers have the power to change conditions in the factory. They have power but they don’t always know their power. They have fear and worry because they never had training about the rights of the worker given by law. We try to give workers training when they join the union. Now 20% to 30% of our workers feel different than before, in the old days. (Thida, 35, female branch leader, 06/03/18)

Moreover, this sense of identity and power has increasingly extended beyond the factory walls, as targets of actions and protests have upscaled. After talking through the issues facing them on the shop floor, I asked Chetna and her colleagues where the responsibility for resolving these problems rests. She replied unambiguously:

Most responsibility for our situation goes to the government… They just ignore our problems. They take us for granted and every day our situation gets worse… The one who could solve our problems is the government, they have the power to do it effectively, if only they are willing. (Chetna, 43, female branch leader, 25/01/18).

Thus, in its infancy the Cambodian labour movement and the episodic instances of industrial action it sparked was borne, as Hughes (2007:842) has detailed, not of wider structural issues like pay and legal protections but local grievances, in the form of poor treatment by managers and supervisors through forced overtime, verbal abuse and racist slurs. Today, however, workers’ goals are more ambitious. The source of their frustrated life chances is not identified as individual owners or employers at single factory sites but in the wider failure of the state to make interventions to safeguard their lives and livelihoods.

Moreover, the trade union movement is envisioned as a vehicle to push back and drive reform, as detailed by Chetna, again:

We can use the power of the trade union to give comments and create campaigns to let the government know everything we demand to improve the workers’ quality of life. If we keep doing this, one day the government may see and follow our ideas to change our quality of life. (Chetna, 43, female branch leader, 25/01/18)

Here, Chetna shows that workers’ demands and aspirations are no longer limited to a transformation of working conditions and economic structures. Instead, they have extended into the realm of state politics. Indeed, many have come to view the skills and networks developed through activism as primers for a future role in political office:

I want to stand at the commune elections next time in 2021… Most people know the ruling party is not good enough to improve villager’s quality of life. We could use our experience as representatives here to do a good job. (Chetna, 43, female branch leader, 25/01/18)

The union always tries to teach me and train me to do work, to learn the skills needed to become a leader at the union. When we possess these kind of skills, we could go back to our village and become a village chief or a commune chief, or something like that. (Mao, 40, male branch deputy leader, 08/02/18)

These ambitions are not harboured silently. Instead, the arduous, fastidious and small-scale work at this intimate level of organisation has, on occasion over the last decade, given way to national mobilisations, with sector-wide strikes in 2010 (Arnold 2013) and 2013 (Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018) bringing hundreds of thousands of workers on to the streets. Although the history of strike action is as old as the industry itself (Hughes 2007), garment workers’ ability to build local grievances into a coordinated movement against the state has never been more clear than during the 2013 demonstrations, when more than 100,000 workers chanted slogans and blocked roads. Evidencing the unions’ grassroots power, this was, moreover, ‘an autonomous strike by rank-and-file workers’ in which ‘the unions, whether government controlled or ‘pro-worker’, were largely unable to lead or contain the protests’ (Arnold 2017:30; Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018).

Thus, in 2013, garment workers’ role in driving consolidated opposition to the RGC was laid bare. Moreover, the revenge of those forgotten workers did not go unpunished. Nationwide and still highly politicised strikes continued for a few months after the election but the RGC silenced the unrest on the morning of January 3rd 2014. Local and global media documented the state’s response, broadcasting images of the bloodied and barefoot bodies of five workers killed by military police in riot gear. The lethal fire of their AK47 assault rifles was used to break up a crowd accused of throwing stones.

**Intensifying authoritarianism: Labour under the crackdown**

Whilst such scenes shook headlines around the world, they did not shock Cambodians. Harassment, detainment, and alleged assassination of RGC critics and human rights activists has been the norm, rather than exception, for the more than three decades of CPP rule, as prominent cases including murdered trade unionist Chea Vichea (Hughes 2007), environmentalist Chut Wutty (Lim 2017), political commentator Kem Ley (Norén-Nilsson 2018) and the repeatedly imprisoned female land rights campaigner Tep Vanny (Brickell 2014) attest. Indeed, reinforced by countless other examples of less recognised but no less stark state brutality, it is clear ‘violence from above’ (Springer 2009b:148) has been a persistent feature of the RGC’s tenure.

Nonetheless, the violence of January 2014 was indicative of two key traits that have shaped the RGC’s attempts to reassert control in the period following: a doubling down of familiar tactics of intimidation and cooptation, coupled with a refocusing of the RGC’s attention on urban workers. Developing these themes in this section, I take as a starting point Bruff and Tansel’s call to elaborate how ‘social struggles and various forms of resistance shape the manifestations of authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019:234). Moving away from a conception of the crackdown as a single event or moment of spectacular violence, in what follows I document the RGC’s longer-term strategic response to workers’ antagonism from below: a series of policy, legislative and practical attempts to coerce and co-opt these dissenting voices from above. Drawing on the testimony of workers and unionists, labour and employer advocacy groups, as well as review of the literature on Cambodia, I show that the RGC’s manoeuvring represents an intensification of already unfolding authoritarian neoliberalisation in Cambodia, evolving in tandem with this (ongoing) grassroots provocation. Rather than a shift in approach, then, the crackdown brought a shift in emphasis, replete with customary ‘Cambodian characteristics’ (Springer 2009:2562).

Here, the RGC has attempted to extend its populist appeal to the urban sector, making concerted overtures to win worker’s hearts and minds. Signifying the success of workers’ efforts to ‘jump scales’ and command the attention at the very apex of national governance, appeals to the demographic come direct from the Prime Minister himself. Hun Sen’s personal Facebook page is now an established channel of communication between the premier and the populace, with regular updates targeting garment workers, in particular. A typical post repeats promises that ‘uncle is struggling to deal with the challenges, including coordination of good working conditions and fair pay for nieces and nephews’, reinforcing a paternalistic stance through Cambodia’s customary familiar and hierarchic pronouns. Such pledges have been forwarded by a series of policy initiatives including minimum wage rises and other statutory benefits for the garment sector.

In this respect, the RGC’s immediate response to workers’ uprising of 2013 was a partial concession to their demands, coalesced on an unprecedented rise in the minimum wage for the garment sector from $61 to $160 a month (Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018). To quell the unrest, the RGC made several offers, rising to $100 in January 2014 (Arnold 2017). This upward trend in wages has continued. From January 2019, the minimum wage is $182 (ILO 2018), with a commitment to rise to $250 by 2023 (Yon and Baliga 2018). Placing this in context, the sector’s minimum wage rose only three times in the first fifteen years since it was introduced at $40 in 1997. Yet since 2013 it has risen seven times already (ILO 2018); a nominal increase of 51% versus 198% over the two periods, respectively.

Workers themselves are ambivalent about the gains, however. As one argued, the new salary is ‘still not enough for us to live as well as 10 years ago’ (Kunthea, 27, female worker, 16/11/17); another elaborating, ‘then we earned less but we spent less. We could save money. Now we earn money but we spend more, so our situation is worse’ (Pisey, 38, female worker, Russey Keo, 03/11/17). Indeed, in real terms, wages have risen more slowly: increasing just 44% between 2000 and 2016, for example (ILO 2015). Moreover, the 2019 salary still accounts for less than 50% of Cambodia’s living wage (Ford and Gillan 2017). As the evidence above attests, though they are unable to articulate the difference in such terms, it is sensed by workers in their stalled livelihoods and waylaid aspirations of improved living conditions and life chances.

Thus, whilst the RGC claims its wage interventions redistribute growth, the gains are more equivocal. Indeed, following successive increases of 64% and 28% in 2013 and 2014, the RGC has since committed to deliver only ‘incremental increases’ in salary payments, capped informally at 10% (Arnold 2017). From 2018, however, a new Minimum Wage Law codifies the requirement that the minimum wage must be a ‘predictable figure or increment rate that grows gradually steady’ (RGC 2018). Given that the current salary remains at considerable distance from a living wage, even if the RGC meets the maximum 10% increment each year henceforth – healthy in the abstract – this would still leave workers’ livelihoods locked below basic needs for the foreseeable future (CCHR, SC and ITUC 2017).

Indeed, despite claims to fight in workers’ corner, the RGC’s actions and rhetoric remain more in line with Cambodia’s ‘most powerful’ (Ear 2013:96) industry lobby – the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia [GMAC]. The RGC’s wage supression supports GMAC’s steadfast line that low labour costs constitute Cambodia’s competitive advantage, rather than, for example, ethical branding, for which Cambodia is somewhat paradoxically also renowned (Arnold 2017). This emphasis on labour also obscures broader structural problems that hamper the industry, such as high electricity costs and infrastructural deficits (ILO 2015). Rather than exert upwards pressure on the RGC to invest to overcome these deficiencies, GMAC’s rhetoric instead passes the buck downwards, towards workers, highlighting their low productivity. As wages have risen, this has given employers cause and licence to pass increased costs on to workers.

Many factories have now switched to a ‘new trend’ (Director, male, national labour rights organisation, 30/11/17) of piece-rate payment. When the wage goes up, employers can simply increase workers’ quota target to offset the loss. As the wage has gone up ‘our workload increased’ one worker explained. ‘Before, when we were paid $153 we had to do 500 products in one day. Now it’s $170, we are expected to do 600 or 700. So it… is not fair’ (Sreyleak, 34, female union member, 05/02/18). Another agreed, ‘the factory owner always wants to push their workers to work harder, work quicker’, (Phanna, 38, female worker, 01/11/17).

Indeed, rising demands place extra strain on workers already operating at capacity. Though missed targets still earn top-ups to minimum wage levels, job security is nonetheless at stake by such ostensible failure as ‘workers who don’t meet the targets can be dismissed by management’ (Director, male, national labour rights organisation, 30/11/17). Accordingly, workers feel pressured to take stark measures to meet targets; to ‘skip going to the toilet, skip going for water and so on, because they don’t want to lose their jobs’ (Director, male, national labour rights organisation, 30/11/17). Workers described an exhausting and counterproductive cycle where ‘we feel tired because we have too much to do then our ability is reduced so we cannot do the work on time’ (Sovann, 20, female worker, 02/11/17).

In addition to fostering Cambodia’s own climate of ‘permanent austerity’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019:233), the new law also limits their labour rights. Legal analysis underlines its latent function to ‘severely restrict the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association, and expression’ (CCHR, SC, ITUC 2017: 1) and, in doing so, violate several international human and labour rights conventions. The minimum wage law is, however, just one example among a suite of legislation that targets the rights and operations of civil society groups, including workers and unions, during the crackdown. Indeed, alongside softer appeals courting the favour of workers, the RGC has driven through coercive measures to quash alternative channels supporting workers with resources, knowledge, or avenues for dissent.

Perhaps the most pernicious – the main problem we face now’ (President, female, national trade union, 23/11/17) according to each of the independent unions I spoke with – is the Law on Trade Unions [LTU], passed in 2016 (RGC 2016). A prime example of the RGC’s penchant for legal doublespeak, among its objectives are to ‘protect the legitimate rights and interests of all persons who fall within the provisions of the labour law’ and ‘ensure the rights to collective bargaining’. In the words of unions, however, the LTU’s effect has been quite the opposite. Instead, ‘after the trade union law was passed… all the rights of the workers were blocked’ (President, male national trade union, 17/11/18), according to one national leader. Indeed, the LTU’s provisions appear deliberately both abstruse. Whilst it does not prohibit trade unions or their activities outright, the LTU has, nonetheless, effectively paralysed their operations. As the above leader elaborated, ‘everything is blocked… we can’t do anything’ (President, male, national trade union, 17/11/18).

Here, for example, among the LTU’s mechanisms are onerous new administrative and reporting requirements that exceed that limited capacity of most unions and therefore frustrate their efforts to organise. These conditions pervade different scales of activity, creating impediments to union work, from individual members to local branches to national executives. In many cases, these new requirements seem innocuous, even common sense, such as those that insist members provide ‘a family book and ID card – and the names must match’ (General Secretary, male, national trade union, 22/03/17) or that local branches register a bank account to manage finances. However, even such stipulations aggravate in a micro context suffused with high levels of informality: where identification documents are often costly and cumbersome to obtain from local authorities, meaning factories typically turn a blind eye if workers just ‘borrow it if they don’t have it’ (General Secretary, male, national trade union, 22/03/17); and where most factory-level leaders ‘didn’t even know what a bank account is’ (Financial controller, female, national trade union, 02/04/18).

**Discussion**

The RGC’s machinations since the peak of workers’ mobilisation in 2013 represent then – at least in part – an attempt by the government to depoliticise labour struggles in an historically fractious arena. On the one hand, ostensibly benevolent gestures such as nominal rises in wages and social protections undermine the core tenets on which national mobilisations have been based. Yet, at the same time, neither have had substantive effect on worker’s livelihoods, instead offering muted checks to vested business elites on the potential of future activisms. Indeed, solidarities and the capacity for collective action are further reduced by the RGC’s violence and intimidation, along with a growing suite of regressive legislation fostering a hostile environment for trade union activity. As rights groups have observed (Licadho 2016; OHCHR 2018), such legislation establishes precedent to punish the exercise of fundamental freedoms and, thereby, quash dissent. The effect of all this is a stark concentration of the ruling party’s power at the expense of grassroot groups: a ‘tightening authoritarian grip’ (O’Neill 2017) tallying with the suggestion (Peck and Theodore 2019) that neoliberal development may include state rollout to compensate internal contradictions borne of it.

On a casual reading, then, workers’ attempts at resisting the neoliberal hegemony in Cambodia have been unsuccessful, even counter-productive. However, images shared weekly on social media by the Prime Minister – snapping selfies with crowds of workers at weekly meet-and-greets – speak to the central position that workers’ actions have leveraged in public life and state politics. Indeed, both the RGC and Prime Minister’s ongoing practices assert an implicit, if anxious, recognition of worker’s power and organisation. Where such images might once have shown the premier wading through rice fields, they symbolise a fundamental shift in Cambodian politics. Here, workers have wrested the RGC’s attentions away from a rural-agrarian base whose support has cemented three decades of power (McCargo 2005; Hughes 2015). Indeed, the RGC’s bipolar authoritarianism, structured around the interplay of coercion and consent – ‘patronage, kleptocracy, and violence’ (Springer 2009a:2254) – have been its erstwhile strategy for ruling the rural. As such, recent events represent an intensification of Cambodia’s authoritarianism rather than an invention of it; the RGC’s authoritarian grip tightening particularly around those urban workers who have thus far largely escaped its grasp and have used the democratic space afforded to them to forge solidarities that challenge the deprivations of the neoliberal state.

On the one hand, echoing experiences elsewhere, this geographic shift in the RGC’s attentions further evidences how the ‘now-storied “places left behind”’ rank ‘among the most symbolically and strategically important battlegrounds’ (Peck and Theodore 2019:257) in neoliberalism’s revanchist moment**.** Yet whilst reflective of wider trends, this refined conceptualisation also call into question the notion of the ‘global authoritarian turn’ (Handel and Dayan 2017:471; Magalhães 2019:402) on two grounds: first, affirming that the ‘spatiality’ of authoritarian neoliberal development remains ‘crucial to its very character’ (Peck and Tickell 2002:182) and second, contesting its novelty. As the Cambodia case aptly demonstrates, the notion of a ‘turn’ obfuscates the lengthy, inured association of ‘authoritarian capitalist statecraft’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019:239) with the neoliberal project.

Indeed, whilst this implies a subtler shift in Cambodian politics than the ‘descent into dictatorship’ that caught hold in popular discourse, the implications have nonetheless been seismic. The RGC’s attempts to crackdown on workers’ freedoms and stifle opposition have caught the ire of the EU, the primary export market for Cambodian garment and footwear products (ILO 2017). The EU’s threat to withdraw tariff-free market access granted through the EBA will cost the industry an estimated $700 million (Hor and Baliga 2017), placing 700 000 jobs and a heavily dependent national economy at risk (ADB 2014). The RGC’s increasing inability to protect its own interests whilst abiding by the aid and trade terms of Western development partners like the EU underscores, at least in part, its warming of late to China’s advances in the region, now Cambodia’s largest source of debt (IMF 2017) and foreign investment (KPMG 2018). China’s financing and loans come with their own strings attached, accused by some of ‘debt trap diplomacy’ (Pavlićević and Kratz 2018). Yet for their faults, they provide a ready supply of funds with a don’t ask, don’t tell approach to internal affairs. The allure of this interested apathy has proved hard to resist among Cambodia’s leaders, looking to leverage against EU dictates.

Intensifying authoritarianism in Cambodia, then, has geopolitical reverberations. However, this is not geopolitics by the usual agents. To paint the RGC as victims to the ‘neo-colonial methods’ of a China intent on ‘exporting its governance style abroad’, as the opposition leader Sam Rainsy (2019) has done, exonerates the role of Cambodia’s leadership in its current predicament. Similarly, the erstwhile narrative of China’s regional rise ‘enabling’ (Croissant 2018) intensifying authoritarianism in Cambodia, as though the tilt to China is a welcomed or elective strategy by the RGC to facilitate an expansion of its power, further ignores the significant trade-offs that a less closeted authoritarianism threatens in terms of waning legitimacy and increased regime instability (Bruff 2014). Here, the RGC’s ingrained and continuing cultivation of personalist attachments and webs of patronage politics in the courting of popular consent suggest it is both attuned and averse to such risks.

Instead, among the ‘alternative stories’ (Routledge 2003) that undergird the RGC’s fluctuating commitments to the EU and China are those of workers and their struggles. Evidencing Sparke’s assertion (2007:124) that ‘everywhere, but always somewhere,’ there is struggle ‘to take back and sustain human geographies in spite of utterly inhuman geographies of dispossession’, a flourishing labour movement has evolved through Cambodia’s neoliberalisation, mobilising formidable grassroots opposition to its everyday injustices. Exemplifying the heuristic utility of anti-geopolitics for connecting internal dynamics and international manoeuvres in the unfolding of late neoliberalism – crucially, in a manner than does not suppose the eminence of the latter – it is this resistance, I argue here, that has shaped the RGC’s late trajectory and lurch east. Unable to manage popular resistance to protracted neoliberal austerity within the dictates of the EU’s prescribed good governance requirements, the RGC’s tilt to China looks less like a cause and more probably a consequence of the push for containment of disquiet.

In defiance of political geography’s ‘parochial’ (Sharp 2011) gaze, then, these resistances organised at the most micro level have proven capable of ‘jumping scale’, shifting the playing field of both national and international state skirmishes and lending weight to Koopman’s (2011:281) assertion that ‘geopolitics is not just some great game played by great men’. Cambodia’s working women have instead leveraged a ‘geopolitics from below’ (Routledge 2003), articulating a subaltern struggle to resist the coercive and intertwined forces of capital and state power, albeit with contradictory and still volatile outcomes.

 **Conclusion**

Faced with a rise in authoritarian politics at the global level, recent years have seen geographers pay increasing attention to the nexus between neoliberalism and authoritarianism, via work that explores their contemporary proliferation as a co-creating rather than parallel process (Peck and Theodore 2019). However, such analysis has been critiqued (Bruff and Tansel 2019) for its largely top-down orientation, focused on the ‘rollout’ of penal policy-making, or broader geopolitical shifts, like the rise of China. In contrast, this paper offers a bottom-up analysis for understanding the unfolding trajectory of late capitalist development, aimed at uncovering the articulation of what has been labelled authoritarian neoliberalism. In doing so, whilst affirming the suggestion that these twinned trends are not discrete but symbiotic, I also show that this complementarity, though imbricated in broader global processes, is rooted in, mediated, resisted, and reworked by local geographies.

The article develops these themes through an exploration of garment worker activism in Cambodia, presenting an alternative telling of the dynamics of Cambodia’s electoral upheavals and authoritarian crackdown from the perspective of workers and their labour struggles. By conceptualising these struggles as the articulation of ‘anti-geopolitics’ (Routledge 2003), I help to recast understanding of Cambodia’s authoritarian ‘turn’ away from a top-down imposition of naked autocratic governance towards a grassroots provocation of intensifying authoritarian strategies.

An anti-geopolitics approach affirms the potential of grassroots grievances to ‘jump scales’ (Tufts and Savage 2009; Merk 2009). Here, the ‘relentless coproduction’ (Brickell 2014:1269) of women worker’s everyday lives and geopolitical dynamics illustrates the entanglement, rather than nested hierarchic ordering, of the ‘global/local’ and ‘geopolitical/everyday’. In Cambodia, workers’ ongoing refusal to acquiesce to intensifying demands of capital, acute marginalisation and rampant dispossession has led to a reshaping of macro conditions – albeit in a contradictory manner.

Where, therefore, a global wave of illiberal democracy has fed concern about the ‘terrifying’ ‘tide’ (McCarthy 2019:302) of authoritarian governance, the findings of the paper suggest geography must continue to affirm the spatiality rather than universality of processes of late capitalist development. This is an imperative of not merely critical theoretical but practical importance: our efforts at showing how authoritarian neoliberalism is made in specific contexts provide the potential for its unmaking. Reiterating Bruff and Tansel’s (2019:236) demands to ﬂesh out how authoritarian neoliberalism ‘manifest[s] in concrete contexts’, I suggest here that an anti-geopolitics framing presents a useful lens through which to view the interactions of local geographies with global politics and economy.

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1. To mitigate risk of reprisals, the names of all individuals in this report have been changed and the organisations they are affiliated to remain anonymous. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)