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Gendered repertoires of contention: women's resistance, authoritarian state formation, and land grabbing in Cambodia

Saba Joshi (she/her/hers)

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Gendered repertoires of contention: women's resistance, authoritarian state formation, and land grabbing in Cambodia

Saba Joshi (she/her/hers) 

Department of Politics, University of York, York, UK

This article was named the winner of the 2020 Enloe Award. The committee commented:

This article embodies the spirit of the Enloe Award in providing a feminist understanding of the everyday experiences and strategies of poor women's social movements against the authoritarian regime in Cambodia. It traces the co-constitution of gendered formations of the state and women's collective action through an account of four distinct types of "gendered repertoires of contention" used by the women to protest Cambodia's land grab. The critical-reflexive understanding of social movements offered here illuminates strategies of feminist resistance to authoritarian state power in Cambodia and beyond. The article stood out for its clarity and evidence-based narrative, and we are delighted that it has won the award.

ABSTRACT

As strongmen and autocrats become increasingly visible in global politics, what gendered resistances arise and how do these contend with repressive regimes? Since 2017, following a severe purge of his critics, Cambodia's longstanding Prime Minister Hun Sen has put the country under a near total form of authoritarian rule. His regime has been bolstered by a distinct mode of accumulation involving large-scale land transfers to foreign and domestic allies, which have systematically evicted and dispossessed a large number of the country's smallholder farmers and the urban poor of their homes and agricultural lands. Amid this surge of "land grabbing," Cambodian women from across the country have led and sustained public protests to reclaim their lands. In this article, I study the routines and performances of poor women's collective action against the state and outline four distinct types of "repertoires of contention" used by women in their protests: strategic

CONTACT Saba Joshi  saba.joshi@york.ac.uk  Department of Politics, University of York, Heslington Lane, York, YO10 5DD, UK

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positioning, anti-politics, self-sacrifice, and solidarity. I argue that these repertoires are embedded in and enact the authoritarian state that they contest and advance the notion of the “gendered authoritarian state” that is made visible in contentious interactions between the state and its dispossessed citizens.

KEYWORDS Cambodia; authoritarianism; gender; land grabbing; resistance

I have been told that villagers are eggs and those powerful are stones, that we cannot win against them. But I don't think that way. It is probably true that we are the eggs, and they are the stone[s]; however, we have to clash against the stones even though we might be crushed. At least I can make those stones smell bad. (Srei Pov)¹

Introduction

In Cambodia, I think even if a person has committed a serious crime, and *Samdech*² Hun Sen orders their release, the criminal will be freed. If he says no, no one will dare to release them. That's why we go outside *Samdech*'s house.

Vanna³ and I are at her home in Koh Kong province, in south-western Cambodia, seated outdoors in the drowsy heat of a July afternoon. Since 2009, she has led a struggle with a group of women from her village – about 15 in total – to regain their farmlands, currently occupied by a sugar plantation owned by a Thai–Cambodian conglomerate. Some of her comrades are with us, as we talk about their plans to travel 155 kilometers to Phnom Penh to seek a resolution for their land conflict. When I probe why Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's residence in the capital – the mansion that stands imperiously opposite the Independence Monument, symbolizing Cambodia's national unity – will be one of the places that they will visit for campaigning, Vanna's response lays bare a familiar message. Power carries a name and a face in Cambodia, permeating even the currents that challenge its course.

Hun Sun has effectively held his position for over four decades, though his country has only recently been globally recognized as an authoritarian state. His 2017 crackdown on civil society, independent media, and his most formidable electoral opponent, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), led to ominous pronouncements of the end of democracy in the country. The final blow came when his party – the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) – won all of the seats in National Assembly elections held in 2018. Once hailed as a model of post-Cold War democratization in Southeast Asia, Cambodia thus joined the ranks of a growing number of states witnessing an autocratic turn in the twenty-first century.

The hardening of Hun Sen's regime is not surprising considering the various sources of public discontent that came to the fore in the years

leading up to the 2017 crackdown. Among the most widely cited reasons for popular unrest against the CPP government has been its involvement in “land grabbing” – forcefully dispossessing citizens of their residential, agricultural, and communally accessed lands for large-scale land transfers to private business entities. Such incidents parallel the rise of dispossession spurred by transnational commercial land transactions occurring in many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America since the early 2000s (Borras and Franco 2012). States have played a central role in enabling land dispossession to make way for resource extraction intended for export-oriented industries and capital investments. In Cambodia, as we will see, the coercive redistribution of land to elites is intimately linked to the changing character of the state and the consolidation of the CPP’s authoritarianism, which has relied heavily on land and natural resource appropriation since the early 1990s (Un 2019).

Despite encountering state-led repression and violence, dispossessed Cambodians – including smallholder farmers, Indigenous peoples, and the urban poor – have engaged in resistance, ranging from protests to seeking intervention from international courts in their efforts to counter land grabbing (Subedi 2012, 61–68). In these protracted struggles, Cambodian women have emerged as prominent activists, staking their households’ and communities’ claims over land. Like Vanna and others whom I met in Koh Kong, women across the country have harnessed the public sphere for their appeals, even as the space for exercising civil and political liberties has significantly waned.

Cambodian women’s activism comprises multiple transgressions, including breaching patriarchal norms that delimit their presence in public life. Yet, as several studies argue, their activism accords primacy to women’s roles in the domestic sphere, as “housewives” and mothers, while traditional markers of feminine virtue – such as submissiveness and peacefulness – serve as platforms to articulate their public resistance against land grabbing (Brickell 2014; Lilja 2016; Park 2019). This paradox resonates globally with other examples of protests where traditional feminine identities frame or legitimize women’s resistance and political claim making (see for example Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor 1997; Noonan 1995). Feminist research suggest that such stereotypes, drawn into social movement frames, are not static reflections of pre-formed identities, but often dynamically negotiated constructs, crucially shaped by the state and the wider political sphere (Einwohner, Hollander, and Olson 2000; Mhajne and Whetstone 2018). In turn, notions such as motherhood represent an array of contrasting values and objectives across movements and actors (Carreon and Moghadam 2015). The study of Cambodian women’s activism presented here advances these arguments, illustrating the multivocality of gender ideals and their creative, fluid deployment in public contention.

Women’s collective action reveals not only the gendered norms that enable their political agency, but also the gendered status quo – in other

words, the power that operates to maintain these norms and who benefits from them (Enloe 2014, 12). The political system in which such resistance is embedded and the object of its claim making – the state – are thus exposed as gendered in the loyalties that they enable, the transgressions that they punish, and the political subjectivities that they produce. The historically and situationally contingent circumstances in which social movements occur are also intimately linked with institutional outcomes, and, in a sense, contentious politics *remakes* the state. In Southeast Asia, the diverse institutional architectures that sustain authoritarian regimes are demonstrably shaped by the variation in timing, type, and intensity of contentious politics (Slater 2010). Cambodian women land activists – those who have collectively organized, publicly dissented, and joined the chorus of criticism against the regime during a period of major political transformation – are thus not vestigial to the evolution of state power in their country. Their claim making over land opens up opportunities to investigate questions that receive little attention in the study of democratization. What does women's contentious politics tell us about the reconstitution of gendered power in processes of authoritarian state formation?

I address this question by examining practices and performances of women's contentious politics against land grabbing through the notion of "gendered repertoires of contention." Tilly (2005, 41–42) originally identified repertoires of contention as "routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice." Charged with symbols, ideologies, and discourses, repertoires comprise performances of collective action that are produced through interactions between state structures and social forces (Tilly 2005, 44). In this article, I expand this notion in the following ways. First, I argue that women's mobilization against land grabbing displays *gendered* repertoires of contention, produced at the interface between activists and their wider political-institutional environment, which in this case is marked by a transition to "hegemonic authoritarianism" (Morgenbesser 2019). Conceiving repertoires as heuristic representations of state–society interactions, this analysis reveals how gender constructs are contested and reproduced in processes of state formation. Second, drawing on feminist readings of resistance as "constitutive of an always incomplete subject, marked by strategic rationality, irony and contradiction" (Eschle and Maignushca 2007, 292), I emphasize that repertoires are not expressions of a pre-existing gendered subject but are also performative in the sense that they "constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal" (Butler 1988, 528). With these elements in mind, I seek to expose the gendered authoritarian state in Cambodia, anchored in distinct violent logics, masculinized political institutions, and discursive constructs of gendered subjects enacted in women's contentious politics.

My analysis examines five women-led resistance movements related to three urban-based land conflicts in Phnom Penh, and two rural conflicts in Koh Kong and Kampong Chhnang provinces. Drawing on interviews conducted in 2017 and 2019, I identify the intersections between masculinized state structures and feminized contentious politics by outlining four distinct types of repertoires in women's movements against land grabbing. The next section provides background on authoritarianism and land grabbing. Following a theoretical discussion and presentation of the methods used in this study, I elaborate upon the four types of repertoires of contention.

On stolen grounds: authoritarian state formation and land politics in Cambodia

In the early 1990s, Cambodia entered a new political phase that promised transitions to capitalism and liberal democracy following decades of civil war. During this period, policy planning for Cambodia's economic revival centered on the commodification of the country's vast forest territories. However, land concessions to private actors for timber logging and commercial crop production quickly emerged as lucrative means for political elites such as Hun Sen – who headed Cambodia's socialist government from 1985 to 1989 – to reconstruct and consolidate their power bases. Aided by neoliberal policies pushing for privatization, Hun Sen's success partially lay in distributing forest concessions to CPP party leaders, military, and an emerging class of entrepreneurs who would serve as key allies to his regime (see Cock 2016, 103–110).

With the continued support of international donors, the Cambodian government instituted the 2001 Land Law under which customary norms allowing usufruct rights over farming land were abruptly abolished and “Economic Land Concessions” (ELCs) – the lease of state-held land to private entities for agro-industrial development – were introduced. These reforms proved to be the catalyst for land conflicts that erupted across the country over the next decade. ELCs were frequently allocated on lands already inhabited or used for farming. As the vast majority of the country's smallholder farmers lacked land titles, they were dispossessed of their livelihoods and left with no legal means to reclaim their lands acquired as ELCs. In urban areas, the state expanded infrastructure and beautification projects financed by foreign investors, prompting the forceful evictions of slum dwellers and the urban poor (see Brickell 2014).

Scholars have argued that the lack of transparency in allotting ELCs allowed the CPP to further entrench its mode of political clientelism at the core of its authoritarian regime (Un and So 2009). Using ELCs as a means to enrich party members and allies, Hun Sen thus established his position at the apex of a state run through patronage networks, simultaneously grounding his legitimacy in traditional images of masculine power such as *bong thom* (big

brother) and *saboraschon* (patron or meritorious benefactor) (Hughes 2006). In this system, entitlements and entrepreneurship are linked to his personal authority; while infrastructure projects such as schools, roads, and hospitals are his “gifts” to the people (Hughes 2006, 473), public–private transactions are articulations of loyalty and friendship (Verver and Dahles 2015, 64).

Despite the CPP regime consolidating control through patronage and under the specter of violence, resistance against land grabbing by ordinary people gained momentum. Countering dispossession was only imperative given that 80 percent of the population depends on small-scale farming. Popular mobilization also thrived due to alliances made between dispossessed citizens and civil society organizations, which have been a significant countervailing force to the CPP’s expansion (Un 2019).

In 2008, a struggle led by “housewives” from Boeung Kak Lake (BKL) district erupted in the capital, emerging as an emblem of women’s resistance and civil society–community alliances against land grabbing in Cambodia. BKL women’s successful complaint at the World Bank’s Inspection Panel in 2011 eventually led to the souring of ties between the Bank and the Cambodian government, and the former froze loans to the country for four years. The BKL women’s struggle demonstrated how women’s resistance provokes the full force of the Cambodian state, enacted through pervasive physical violence, intimidation, and incarceration. Brickell (2020, 29, 31) argues that the Cambodian state’s attempts to construct BKL women as an “existential threat to social order” exposes the “affective potency” of their resistance, which required the repeated jailing of its leading activist, Tep Vanny, to limit her presence in public life. However, as the symbolic currency of anti-land-grabbing protest traversed political scales, the regime was pushed to reconstruct its legitimacy through various measures, including land reform.

In 2012, Hun Sen announced a moratorium on ELCs and a land-titling program to quell dissent against land grabbing. While these reforms were largely ineffective in addressing grievances, they were “performed in public as political theatre” (Loughlin and Milne 2021, 376), using well-worn registers of paternalism and strongman leadership. The failure of such populist measures, and the regime’s fears of losing power in upcoming general elections, led to a brutal and systematic political crackdown on electoral opposition, the free press, and civil society. Not only did Hun Sen’s government dissolve its electoral rival, the CNRP, in 2017 by wielding Supreme Court charges of “incitement that would lead to national disintegration” (Morgenbesser 2019, 166); within the same year, independent media organizations such as the *Cambodia Daily* and *Radio Free Asia Cambodia*, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Mother Nature – all of which had been at the forefront of monitoring environmental violations and land grabbing in the country – were also closed down. Weaponizing repressive laws and a corrupt judicial system on the one hand, and directly deploying violence in

the form of the incarceration, intimidation, and political assassination of their political enemies on the other (see LICADHO 2020), the CPP's hegemonic authoritarian rule has emerged from a rapid reshaping of both state and society over the last five years.

Resistance, repertoires, and state formation

Resistance encompasses a wide range of actions at individual, collective, and institutional levels in a number of settings. Feminist engagements with the notion emphasize the subjective and intersubjective processes that generate resistance to racialized, capitalist gender oppression (Lugones 2010). In this article, I integrate feminist thinking with theories of contentious politics – a concept that describes collective political struggle ranging from social movements to civil wars, implying that these types of phenomena share two basic properties. They are *contentious* “in the sense that they involve collective making of claims,” and they are *political* “in the sense that governments of one sort or another figure in the claim making” (Tarrow and Tilly 2009, 438).

Feminist perspectives on contentious politics, such as those articulated by Marx Ferree and Mueller (2007, 587), argue that mainstream theories of contentious politics are androcentric and are thus of limited use for understanding women-led movements. Alongside decentering the normative (male) subject in the study of contentious politics, feminist political theory undoes the separation between structures and agency for the understanding of political contention. Treating gender as a central analytical category entails recognizing the constitutive relationship between resistance and unequal gender relations, states, and other hierarchical structures, and paying attention to the ways in which gendered logics encode systems of power (Parashar, Tickner, and True 2018). Through this, we may be able to analyze how specific historical-spatial configurations of political structures relate to women's agency as contentious actors. Hart (1991), for instance, examines the everyday forms of rural politics in Malaysia's Muda region and shows how peasant women's resistance against their employers was structured by their exclusion from public life and limited access to resources in the form of patronage benefits from local political parties. In a non-democratic context, Noonan's (1995) study of women's movements in Chile under dictatorship exemplifies how formal and informal politics operated along gender lines, the latter yielding space for women's mobilization. Such research demonstrates that recognizing the gendered nature of political structures is crucial for understanding why women (and men) mobilize.

In this article, I conceive gendered repertoires of contention through a feminist “ontology of becoming” whereby agency (resistance) and structures (the authoritarian state) are co-constituted and “structures reproduce

through the practices of knowledgeable agents while at the same time enabling these practices" (Locher and Prügl 2001, 114). I argue that traditional constructs of femininity (as apolitical, non-violent, virtuous, and self-sacrificing) and masculinity (as powerful, violent, and threatening) are simultaneously reproduced and contested in the process of Cambodia's authoritarian state formation. Reading these through the routines and performances of women's collective action, we see that such constructs are unstable and intersubjectively produced in interactions between power holders and their subjects. Additionally, since women's resistance against land grabbing occurs at a time of intense political change in Cambodia – a transition from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism – their repertoires further reveal how gender provides a system of meaning for the maintenance and stabilization of political power.

Feminist political thinking that bridges the gendered separation between public and private spheres is key to the arguments made here. Feminist state theory exposes how these gendered divisions are reorganized in processes of political consolidation and centralization of state power. Peterson (1992, 43) argues that "the structural and ideological separation of 'family', 'economy' and 'politics'" emerged "as 'successful' states consolidated territorial control, expanded commercial – and plundering – activities." With these processes, new forms of gendered hierarchies were forged through states' encroachments into the private sphere and reconfiguring of familial patriarchy. Feminist international political economy further challenges the public/private binary through its scrutiny of the relationships between global macro-economic environments, households, and the unwaged labor performed predominantly by women therein. These analyses center households in histories of capitalist development and assert that the private spheres of labor – as spaces for the production of life – are distinct from yet integrated with spaces for the production of goods and services (Bhattacharya 2017; Elias and Rai 2019).

Cambodia's land grab narrative serves as a powerful illustration of how local articulations of neoliberal economic forces – linking transnational commercial entities and international institutions with a repressive regime – unfold as violent, predatory interventions that animate gendered materialities of private lives. We thus see how global economic processes promoting the privatization of natural resources and driving transnational interest in land, and the politics of care, provisioning, and other forms of feminized household labor, are violently conjoined in processes of dispossession and eviction. The "seemingly pre-political" household is thus revealed as a space deeply connected to state and global political economic power (Enloe 2011, 447), and simultaneously as a site of struggle. Cambodian women's primary responsibility for the social reproduction of the household articulates a distinct gendered political subjectivity in conflicts that ensue

from the reorganization of the state and its constitutive elements, territory and property. At the same time, the state's "intimate warfare" (Brickell 2020, 34) against the women whom I discuss here also intersects with the patriarchal violence that sustains gendered hierarchies in households. In the repertoires detailed below, we see how gendered constructs of family and citizenship are unevenly and multivocally performed as women simultaneously resist and reinforce their connections with the domestic sphere.

Methodology

Data generation and analysis

Research is never innocent of the social and political conditions in which it is produced (Smith 1999, 5). For this study, I draw on research on land grabbing and agrarian change conducted between March 2016 and August 2019 in several Cambodian provinces. During my 15-month research stay in 2016–2017, political tensions that culminated in the CPP's crackdown were rising. My encounters with state authorities – such as being restricted from visiting certain villages and surveilled during interviews – became "deliberative moments" (Ackerly and True 2010, 43) that shaped the course of this research. These moments of ethical and practical reflection also laid bare the power relations between the research participants, my collaborators, and myself, particularly exposing different levels of risks involved in our discussions on land grabbing. My navigation of research relationships in a political atmosphere marked by fear and intimidation thus involved a heightened attentiveness to the boundaries that the research participants and my collaborators drew around topics of discussion. Reflexive recognition of the participants' silences, absences, and hesitancy, and, in tandem, acknowledgment of desires to articulate, tell stories, and be heard thus crucially framed the co-constructed nature of this work.

My activist interlocutors were deeply aware of the political sensitivities around land grabbing given their numerous embodied encounters with state policing. However, in light of the public nature of their resistance, groups and individuals were keen to share their collective and personal experiences with researchers, journalists, and NGOs, seeing them as allies and means by which to amplify their struggles. Knowing me as a non-Cambodian scholar, my interlocutors often suggested that I "broadcast" voice recordings and photographs that I generated in our meetings to public authorities in Cambodia and beyond. In this article, I center activists' voices, shared practices, and collective political activities, bearing in mind their defiant desires to make their ongoing struggles globally visible.

I established contacts with land activists through civil society actors whom I met professionally, and I worked with Meta, a research assistant with prior

work experience with human rights organizations.⁴ Meta and I met with several land activist groups in Phnom Penh, Kampong Chhnang, and Koh Kong in 2017 and 2019. In this article, I draw on individual and group interviews with 30 activists belonging to five groups, most of whom I met on multiple occasions in May–June 2017 and July–August 2019. These interviews were conducted in Khmer, with Meta leading the discussion. Most one-to-one interviews lasted between one and two hours, while group discussions were often longer than two hours. Additionally, I digitally recorded all of the interviews with the participants' permission and these were independently translated and transcribed.

In analyzing interviews, I primarily relied on inductive coding methods drawn from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). This method, involving extensive coding of data over multiple cycles, allowed me to maintain reflexivity throughout my research process and “ground” this analysis in the participants' narratives. In the first round of coding, I extensively applied descriptive coding to my interview transcripts and field notes using NVivo 11 qualitative analytical software. In line with grounded theory, my coding cycles were integrated with data generation, and often the codes and categories that emerged in my analysis shaped the themes of my next interviews.

Cases

As my aim in this article is to understand the performance of women's collective action, I opted to study groups that had elected women to be the key representatives⁵ of their village-/community-level mobilization. Such groups, I observed, were typically comprised of more women members. The women whom I met across the five groups were between the ages of 20 and 60, and typically mothers who were either currently or previously married. In the two rural cases, most of the women were smallholder farmers who had lost varying plot sizes of land – between one and ten hectares – to land acquisitions involving CPP senators, and in some cases, their homes were at risk. Many of the women had inherited these lands from their parents, who had acquired them in the 1980s following the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. In Phnom Penh, where dispossession centered on their residential lands, women were typically food sellers and small business owners who had bought their housing plots in the 1990s and 2000s, either independently or with their partners.

While the women whom I met differed in terms of literacy level and class, both across and sometimes within the five groups, economic dependency on land and homes was a common feature in their narratives. Rural women pointed to the loss of income from agriculture, while urban women did not want to be displaced from their existing locations because of access to

Table 1. Summary of cases.

Village/ settlement	Lor Peang	Praek Chik	Thmor Korl	Boeung Kak	Borei Keila
Location	Kampong Chhnang province (rural)	Koh Kong province (rural)	Phnom Penh (urban)	Phnom Penh (urban)	Phnom Penh (urban)
Conflict start date	2006	2006	2012	2008	2011
Conflict cause	Private company (owned by CPP senator)	ELC (owned by CPP senator) and private company	ELC	ELC	Land-sharing agreement/ Social Land Concession
Affected households	108 (agricultural)	175 (agricultural), 63 (residential)	600 (residential)	4,200 (residential)	384 (residential)

markets for their businesses. Another common aspect across these cases was the lack of formal land ownership certificates. While some groups' main objective was to regain access to their lands or homes, others were agitating for land titles, even after the immediate threat of eviction had ended.

Table 1 summarizes these five cases, highlighting the years in which the conflicts began, their causes, and their scale in terms of affected households.

Gendered repertoires of contention

In this section, I describe four types of repertoires of contention used by women land activists across the cases summarized above. These repertoires are often performed together, at the same protest events and sites. By drawing analytical distinctions between these four types of repertoires, I show how each type is embodied by specific gendered performances, aligned with movement goals and shaped by state responses. Their distinctness thus does not signal mutual exclusivity; rather, I see these repertoires as interlocking parts in the pursuit of shared interests (Tilly 2005, 41–42).

Repertoires of strategic positioning

Feminized front lines in public protests and demonstrations are perhaps the most recognizable repertoires of resistance against land grabbing in Cambodia. The currency of these repertoires, noted across several other movements, draws on the gendered logic that violent confrontations are more likely when men face the masculinized security apparatus of the state during public demonstrations (Brickell 2014, 1257; Hennings 2019, 108–109; Park 2019, 31). Yet, most accounts concur that women frequently endure violent consequences due to their public resistance activities (LICADHO 2014). A majority of the women land activists whom I met spoke of the physical and verbal violence that they faced while protesting. For example, one activist recounted: “On

Valentine's Day, a day that is globally celebrated, we protesters got beaten like animals by the police at Khan Chamkar Mon [district in Phnom Penh]. On that day, I did nothing besides cry" (interview, Koh Kong, May 7, 2017). Some have argued that statements such as these demonstrate that women's "enhanced role in reducing violence in protests against land grabs and forced evictions is over-rated" (Hennings 2019, 115). However, one activist from BKL explained why these repertoires are still popular in land grab protests in Cambodia:

Based on my experience as a protester with the community for over ten years, I have seen that when men lead the protest it is much more violent. They get seriously threatened. That doesn't mean that there is no violence in protests led by women. We have had people with cuts to the head, broken teeth, broken arms, etc., but it is more likely to happen if men are at the forefront of protests. (interview, Phnom Penh, July 30, 2019)

As activists across the cases described their strategies of positioning women at the front of protest lines to reduce incidents of violence, they referenced performances of femininity similar to those idealized in historical poems such as the *Chbab Srey* ("Women's Code").⁶ In Borei Keila, an activist spoke of how her behavior altered when the police confronted her; she would join her hands, speaking softly, to save herself. She lamented that men could not perform such acts of submission in the same way (interview, Phnom Penh, June 11, 2017). Another protester explained how such performances of submissiveness are learned and situationally enacted:

People were afraid of the police during protests. Some peed in their pants just seeing the police. Right now, they are not scared. I gave them ideas on how to handle the police. For example, if they threaten us, we kneel, lie down or crawl ... I think women can employ more tactics than men. I'm not biased toward women, but women can do a lot of things that men cannot do. (interview, Thmor Korl, July 29, 2019)

Lilja (2016, 606) argues that while women's activism over land grabbing in Cambodia is "parasitic on traditional discourses," over time their resistance frequently disrupts these gendered constructs. Examples of such disruption were the stories of activists whom I met in Kampong Chhnang, who recounted how they strategically deployed repertoires built on performances of feminine peacefulness when confronted with the state's security apparatus. When around 100 military officers and provincial policemen arrived at their village to arrest their group leader and other activists, villagers blocked the police from entering the house where the activists were hiding:

Some older women lied to the police, saying that they were passing through to reach their fields. Then they guarded the entrance to my house and used loud-speakers to rally and hit washing pots loudly to scare the police. They almost burnt themselves by holding burning palm branches to block the police from coming inside my house. (interview, Kampong Chhnang, June 4, 2017)

This account describes how performances of weakness and non-violence in women's activism are deployed strategically. Older women in Kampong Chhnang initially used their perceived feebleness to cross police barricades but later ambushed policemen with burning palm leaves. This demonstrates that women land activists' enactments of pacificity are interactive, unstable performances that shift in contentious episodes.

Repertoires of strategic positioning illuminate that the gendered constructs of masculine aggressiveness and feminine pacificity are sutured to the regime's violent policing, and simultaneously reproduced in activist practices. Routinely performed, learned, and tactically enacted in contentious interactions, these repertoires brand women's bodies with the state's repressive impulses.

Repertoires of anti-politics

Whenever we start protesting, the government treats us as enemies. They label us as members of the opposition party. I have tried to explain to them that we do not protest for any party, but we protest for our homes and land. (interview, Kampong Chhnang, July 28, 2019)

With the rise of oppositional parties like the CNRP in Cambodia, activists such as the woman from Kampong Chhnang quoted above were compelled to find ways to assert their claims without fueling the government's narrative that painted land activists as partners of their political enemies. This tension thus produced what I call repertoires of anti-politics, entailing strategic distancing from electoral politics for the achievement of their objectives.

While some women mentioned that they had sometimes been approached by members of the opposition to contest elections or campaign on their behalf, they added that they had refused such invitations on the grounds that political connections would probably worsen their chances of resolving their land disputes.⁷ Referencing constant harassment and intimidation by public authorities, one activist explained why she did not want to be involved in electoral politics: "I am not involved with the opposition, but I am in this terrible situation already. If I were with them, the government would think that our campaign against land grabbing has always been politically motivated" (interview, Koh Kong, May 7, 2017). This activist's statement underlines the toll that activism had taken on her everyday life. The "terrible situation" that she described was echoed by women across movements who discussed the struggles of living precariously in their villages due to economic insecurity, constant police surveillance, death threats, and the loss of access to public services because of the hostility of local officials. Activism is also the source of social alienation, as neighbors and relatives distance themselves due to fears of facing similar repercussions:

When we protested, calling for release of five activists, people from the neighboring villages called us “opposition party” and said one day we all would be arrested and jailed ... They criticize us and never support us. They are so scared they don't even dare to talk to us. (interview, Koh Kong, May 8, 2017)

The CPP's longstanding practice of ruling through a political culture of *korod*, *kaud*, *klach* (respect, admiration, fear), particularly in rural areas, is thus mirrored through these experiences (Öjendal and Sedara 2006). By openly challenging the regime, activists encounter both insidious and overt push-back in everyday life. Given this, several women activists deployed repertoires of anti-politics, framing their protests as necessary for their families and livelihoods: “I just want to protest and get my land back so that I will be able to support my family. I want nothing from politics” (interview, Phnom Penh, May 11, 2017).

Here, the dominant construct of women as non-political actors, resulting from what Lilja (2008, 75) describes as “naturalized truths” of politics in Cambodia being a masculine realm, serves as an asset to women's resistance. However, while repertoires of anti-politics allow women land activists to continue their mobilizations by delinking their activities from formal politics, they also reconstitute gendered discourses of power that exclude women from political spaces. Through policing and intimidation, the CPP regime constrains these activists from broadening their engagement in the public sphere – for instance, by delegitimizing their struggles if they seek to use their leadership, mobilization, and organizational capabilities for electoral gains. Everyday forms of threat and intimidation inflicted upon activists by the state thus trigger repertoires of anti-politics, which go on to reinforce the ideological separation between home and state that makes politics and public life largely male preserves in Cambodia.

Being “non-political” is also a multivalent symbol elaborated upon a moral critique of politicians and political institutions. In framing their resistance as non-political, activists thus often cited examples of corruption and malpractice as the norm in formal politics – something in which they wanted no part. Repertoires of anti-politics are thus transformed into spiritual sources of power to counter the immoral power wielded by state authorities. The activists whom I met in BKL and in Kampong Chhnang, for example, held public cursing ceremonies in their villages and in front of public institutions, where effigies of local officials and company owners were stabbed, cursed, and burned (Jackson and Monkolansey 2015). A group of activists described how spiritual forms of protest subvert rituals performed by the powerful:

We organized this ritual because the authorities are dishonest. Normally, the court asks each party to take an oath. So we used their words of oath in our ritual. We used their words to curse them. We said “May you die in a traffic accident, in a plane crash, from a snake bite” and so on. (interview, Kampong Chhnang, July 28, 2019)

By giving their political struggle a cosmological dimension and channeling the centrality of spirits in everyday life, repertoires of anti-politics thus disembodied contestation that enables continued resistance against the regime. Such practices puncture the state's legitimacy, exposing power as immoral and disturbing the masculine myth of power holders as meritorious benefactors. Activists involved in cursing ceremonies referenced examples of misfortune that had befallen those cursed public officials as evidence of their effectiveness (Pheap 2014). Spiritual retribution gives what real-life systems of justice do not: power to the weak. Spiritual allies (unlike human counterparts, who are branded "opposition party collaborators" by the regime) are thus anti-political screens that enable confrontation with authority through the use of potent symbolism.

Repertoires of self-sacrifice

In confronting the precarity caused by dispossession, women's activism against land grabbing enacts what Butler (2016, 25) identifies as the "mobilization of vulnerability" in acts of public resistance. In the five cases studied here, women's personal narratives of vulnerability were publicly articulated in what I call repertoires of self-sacrifice. Through these repertoires, we see how collective experiences of harm endured through contentious interaction with the authoritarian regime – including intimidation, physical violence, and incarceration – produce shared symbolic resources for activism, and evoke an idealized image of Khmer women as self-sacrificing for their families and society (Kent 2011, 197).

Repertoires of self-sacrifice are visible in Cambodian women's activism against land grabbing through "staging of injustice through and on the body" (Brickell 2020, 31). In protesting against the jailing of their comrades, for instance, activists from Kampong Chhnang carried out a number of public demonstrations, telling stories of their suffering and prominently displaying their emotions. As protesters rallied behind distressing images of villagers lying unconscious, children crying, and the police beating activists during their march, their group leader wept as she addressed the government during a press conference, holding her infant child in one hand and the loudspeaker in the other (see SEOAN 2019). Women from BKL have similarly highlighted their emotional vulnerability by stripping outside the Cambodian parliament, and symbolized their precarity through costumes and props during public protests (Brickell 2014).

Public displays of vulnerability establish the image of the state as powerful and protesters as fragile, like the stones and eggs in Srei Pov's words quoted at the beginning of this article. By highlighting their positions as wives, mothers, and poor farmers, activists underscore their deference to hierarchy, legitimized in Cambodia's moral order that constructs men and masculinity as

symbols of power (Ledgerwood 1990, 18, 22). Parallely, repertoires of self-sacrifice enact feminine virtuousness, primarily accorded to women through their role in the domestic sphere. In this regard, repertoires of self-sacrifice bind activism to virtuousness performed for the sake of the family:

My relatives tried to stop me from protesting, but I told them I need to fight for my children. The children support me, even though they haven't joined the movement. I told my children, "Don't worry, I am old enough to die anyway." (interview, Kampong Chhnang, June 7, 2017)

Public acts of resistance thus prompt a reconfiguration of maternal duties, which involve providing "shade": shelter, safety, and prosperity for their families (Kent 2011, 197–198). As the state intrudes upon the private sphere by shaking the foundations of shelter and safety for dispossessed households, the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice enacted in protest is reproduced in the public realm.

In turn, patriarchal violence that sustains both the state and the household punishes women for transgressing the bounds of the domestic. A well-documented outcome of activism against land grabbing for women in Cambodia has been domestic violence and marital breakdown (Hennings 2019; LICADHO 2014). The women whom I interviewed spoke of the emotional strain that their activism put on their intimate relationships. In Koh Kong, an activist discussed her husband's verbal and physical abuse when she left the province to go to Phnom Penh to lead demonstrations: "Back then, when I went out to protest, he used to tell me off. 'You [expletive], you're going out to look for men again?' Or 'You [expletive], do you want to be killed?'" (interview, Koh Kong, May 6, 2017). Leading protests over land grabs and maintaining conjugal harmony were mutually exclusive not only because of husbands' jealousies and rage at women's abandonment of domestic responsibilities such as cooking and childcare, in favor of protest activities (LICADHO 2014, 4), but also because of cross-cutting conjugal and political loyalties. Chandy, an activist whom I met in Phnom Penh, discussed how her marriage to a government employee collapsed due to her activism. Her ex-husband was opposed to her participation in mobilizations against local authorities, as he thought her visibility as an activist would lead him to get demoted:

I didn't want to listen to him all the time. I decided I shall be brave and confident to fight for my own house ... The whole community was so proud of me, but finally, when we got divorced, they pitied me. (interview, Thmor Korl, June 17, 2017)

This activist's story exemplifies the complications of reconfiguring feminine virtue in the public sphere. When her activism caused her marriage to end, she was pitied rather than revered, suggesting that women fail to be virtuous when their commitment to public resistance outranks private obligations of

being a dutiful wife. These tales of private pain are, however, given voice in the public sphere through emotional appeals that attempt to reconstruct virtue through expressions of vulnerability and sacrifice. After my interview, I learned that Chandy had appeared on a radio program focused on victims of domestic violence. On how her activism affected her marriage, she said:

If he [Chandy's ex-husband] is listening, I want him to understand my feelings. I came out to protest to protect the housing rights of our children and the family. If we find a solution for our land dispute, I am ready to be a good wife. (Soravy 2016)

Repertoires of solidarity

Scholarship on women's movements has shown how political campaigns are built on foundations of "social movement communities" – encompassing heterogeneous actors linked through diffused, submerged networks that share symbols, rituals, values, and goals – that create new networks and coalitions (Staggenborg and Lecomte 2009, 164–165). Movements over land grabbing in Cambodia are similarly embedded in social movement communities bound by common goals and submerged networks, made visible in repertoires of solidarity.

In my interviews, activists from all five cases mentioned meeting, learning from, and sharing experiences with communities from across Cambodia that face dispossession. Such networks are often established through activist-led initiatives and civil society events. Connections with civil society actors are particularly useful for groups in rural areas that have less exposure to organized protests (interview, Koh Kong, May 8, 2017). Analogous to the tactical repertoires of Western feminist movements that adopted tools such as "consciousness raising," networks thus become sources of education on laws and gender equality, and inspiring by way of example:

As women, we want to teach women in other communities how to be brave. We want them to know more about land laws, as well as women's rights, and to know that women are equal to men. The main purpose is to make women able to protect their own land. (interview, BKL, June 14, 2017)

During public events, these networks become visible through repertoires of solidarity, when groups converge for marches and demonstrations for each other's causes. An activist from Thmor Korl explained how repertoires of solidarity impact outcomes of contention:

When we build networks, the government tends to listen to us and negotiate with us. When we go to submit a petition with a few people, they [the authorities] throw it in the rubbish bin. Even the reporters, if we hold an event with a few people coming from only one community, they barely show up. (interview, Thmor Korl, June 17, 2017)

This statement describes how public displays of solidarity are tactical performances among activists seeking to increase the visibility of their claims and also to build on each other's assets for claim making.

However, such displays of solidarity have also become a means for the authorities to delegitimize protesters. An activist from BKL described how the authorities reacted to her marching at another group's protest event:

I had a verbal fight the other day. The police said I must have a lot of land because I always show up at protests. I responded that I had only one plot, in BKL. They said, "If so, why do you show up in protests in Koh Kong, Kampong Chhnang, and other places?" I said, "These communities helped me in my protests. Now they suffer like I did, so I have to support them." ... The authorities are very smart. They try to separate communities from helping each other. If we did not have the help from other communities, we would never have succeeded. (interview, BKL, July 29, 2019)

This activist's reflection captures how the government's attempts to reduce the effectiveness and visibility of anti-land-grabbing movements fuel repertoires of solidarity. In turn, these repertoires of solidarity – which serve as potent symbols of anti-CPP sentiment in the country – provoke a cycle of repression. The 2016 Black Monday protests – where a number of the women whom I interviewed marched alongside other activists wearing black clothes to demand the release of detained NGO professionals – typified how cross-sectional solidarity provokes insecurity for the CPP regime. These protests led to a series of arrests, including of BKL's representative Tep Vanny, and the start of the government attack on political dissidents on the grounds that they were attempting an "urban rebellion" and a "color revolution."

At the same time, coalitions and alliances also make visible the gendered cracks that emerge when adopting tactical repertoires in protest. Members of the women-led movement whom I interviewed in Koh Kong said that they hold a number of joint demonstrations and meetings with other groups whose members have similarly been dispossessed of their agricultural lands in the province. While discussing this, the group leader explained why building alliances with the neighboring village, whose movement was primarily led by men, had been difficult: "They think we women stand out more and are more rebellious when we protest. In their own community, they didn't want women leaders because they think if women lead and succeed, it will make them look bad" (interview, Koh Kong, July 30, 2019).

Repertoires of solidarity in women's activism against land grabbing, which arouse a deep fear in the regime, thus work toward reproducing women's activism across Cambodia. By sharing resources and investing energies in each other's campaigns, repertoires of solidarity enable practices of resistance against the CPP regime and allow women – dispossessed of their

homes and facing the repressive apparatus of the state – to carve out a space in the public sphere.

Conclusion

With land grabbing as its lens, this article has focused on the gendered contestations that arise at the intersection of state repression and dispossession. As a form of violence directed toward non-elite social groups, land grabbing is hardly unique to Cambodia. Historic resonances include numerous colonial encounters in the Global South and capitalist expansion across the world. In the current era of neoliberal reforms, plunder of public resources and “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003) are pervasive sources of vulnerability, precarity, and injustice. This article has signaled that feminist curiosity in relationships of power and inequality underwriting these historically situated processes turns global political economy and macro-political narratives inside out. Centering the practices, routines, and discourses of women land activists in Cambodia, I have sought to understand global and macro-political phenomena through lived experiences of collective resistance.

Drawing on repeated and extensive interviews with five groups led by women resisting state-sanctioned land grabbing in Cambodia, this study builds on feminist scholarship that emphasizes the material and discursive sources of agency that gender as a system of meaning provides. Each of the four types of repertoires that I have outlined adds new theoretical and empirical perspectives that nuance our understanding of women as contentious political actors. While the gendered construct of the public sphere in Cambodia is enacted in women’s resistance, their repertoires comprise multi-valent notions of femininity produced through contentious interactions. In turn, we see how gender serves as a means of constructing, legitimating, and organizing power in processes of state formation that is both enabling and restrictive for practices of public resistance.

The framework that I have applied here thus infuses mainstream notions of political opportunities and framing with feminist insights. Much of our knowledge on women’s movements, and social movements in general, is gleaned from studies of Western democratic or democratizing political systems. By developing the notion of gendered repertoires of contention in relation to a non-democratic political order, this article broadens the empirical scope of feminist inquiry into contentious politics. As hybrid and non-democratic forms of rule become increasingly visible globally, including in fast-growing, major economies such as India, Turkey, and Brazil, this framework invites future feminist analyses of the gendered constitution of state power in a variety of political systems and inquiries into what types of gendered resistances counter these forces and how gender materially and discursively

underwrites resistance. In this way, the heuristic value of the arguments made here may be shaped through heterogeneous accounts of the interactions between distinctive configurations of political order, gender relations, and resistance, and this framework thus recast.

Notes

1. Srei Prov is a former land activist from Boueng Kak Lake, Phnom Penh. As quoted in Brickell (2020, 27).
2. *Samdech* or “Lord” is the shortened version of Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen’s official title in Khmer: *Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo*, or “Lord and Supreme Military Commander of the Gloriously Victorious Troops.”
3. To maintain the anonymity of research participants, none of their real names are included here.
4. At the time, Meta (not her real name) was an independent research consultant.
5. Affected households elected representatives to lead organizing activities and communications with government authorities, legal representatives, and external allies.
6. A didactic poem reportedly first published in 1837, the *Chbab Srey* constructs the ideal Cambodian woman (*srey kruap lek*) as softly spoken, gentle, and obedient to male authority.
7. This is not always the case among women land activists in Cambodia. In 2017, a number of women active in mobilizations against land grabbing became candidates for the CNRP in the commune elections (see for example Robertson 2017).

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Notes on contributor

Saba Joshi is currently a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Gender and Development in the Department of Politics at the University of York, UK. Her doctoral research examined the politics of land grabbing in Cambodia, drawing on extensive field-based research. In 2020–2021, she was Swiss National Science Foundation Research Fellow based at the University of Oxford, UK, where she researched women’s activism over dispossession in contemporary India. Her research and teaching interests broadly lie in the fields of feminist political economy, agrarian politics, and gendered politics of social movements in the Global South.

ORCID

Saba Joshi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0281-0130>

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