Ideological Coalitions and the International Promotion of Social Accountability: The Philippines and Cambodia Compared

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International aid agencies are increasingly placing social accountability at the heart of their governance reform programs, involving a range of social activist mechanisms through which officials are rendered answerable to the public. Crucially, aid agencies are not just promoting these mechanisms in emerging democracies, but now also in authoritarian societies. What then are the likely political regime effects of these mechanisms? We approach this by examining who supports social accountability, why, and the implications for political authority. Focusing on the Philippines and Cambodia cases, it is argued that, to differing degrees, social accountability mechanisms have been subordinated to liberal and/or moral ideologies favoring existing power hierarchies. These ideologies often privilege nonconfrontational state–society partnerships, drawing activists into technical and administrative processes limiting reform possibilities by marginalizing, or substituting for, independent political action pivotal to the democratic political authority of citizens.

Since the mid-2000s, accountability has become a central element in governance reform advocated and supported by international aid agencies, with social accountability a major plank of this new agenda. Social accountability involves various forms of civil society activism intended to hold public officials answerable for their behavior—something that aid agencies are now promoting, not just in emerging democracies but also in authoritarian societies. This raises crucial questions. Do social accountability mechanisms represent an intrinsic opportunity for democratic forces and/or outcomes? If so, what factors facilitate or obstruct the realization of this potential? Alternatively, could the accountability agenda be used by elites to insulate policymaking from substantive contestation by substituting administrative mechanisms for democratic politics? We address these questions by examining who supports social accountability, why, and the implications for political authority.

While the potential for political cooptation through accountability is recognized (Ackerman 2005:20; Goetz and Jenkins 2005), hitherto there has been no sustained examination of different ideologies and interests attached to notions of accountability in general and social accountability in particular.

Yet this is essential for understanding when and why social accountability results in democratic or authoritarian outcomes. For, as we demonstrate, it is not just democratic forces that are attracted to—or are attempting to harness—ideas, institutions and mechanisms of social accountability, but also forces for liberal and moral values compatible with authoritarianism.

We focus on the Philippines and Cambodia—both members of the World Bank-supported Asian Network for Social Accountability, which holds the Philippines as a model of social accountability for Cambodia. These cases offer an ideal opportunity to compare impacts on different political regimes of common techniques of political organization for accountability promoted by international aid agencies. Notwithstanding the presence of significant democratic forces in the Philippines and a comparative absence of such in Cambodia, there are striking parallels to these cases. To varying degrees, social accountability mechanisms have been subordinated to liberal and/or morally based ideas of accountability that help preserve existing power hierarchies and limit the scope for critical evaluation of prevailing reform agendas. Where these ideologies dominate accountability coalitions, they also often privilege nonconfrontational state–society partnerships, drawing activists into technical and administrative processes limiting political reform possibilities by marginalizing or replacing independent collective political action crucial to the democratic political authority of citizens. Indeed, part of social accountability’s attraction for some actors is that it can be...
harnessed to new modes of authoritarian governance suited to the context of globalized market economies—often in the name of democracy.

The discussion below briefly examines arguments about the significance of social accountability for democracy before distinguishing democratic, liberal, and moral ideological rationales for accountability. Historical and structural factors shaping the way particular coalitions have embraced social accountability in the Philippines and Cambodia are then identified. This is followed by an examination of major social accountability initiatives in the case-study countries: the Government Procurement Reform Act in the Philippines and the Demand for Good Governance Program in Cambodia. We demonstrate the potentially broad and flexible appeal of social accountability techniques to coalitions traversing a range of ideologies, actors, and political regime types—authoritarian and democratic.

Social Accountability and Political Regimes

Social accountability mechanisms range widely. They include monitoring and auditing functions—citizen report cards, social audits and society watchdogs on corruption, transparency, labor standards, and electoral institutions—that may generate media attention and political pressure to activate existing formal accountability institutions. They also include direct incorporation of social actors onto state-based or government-initiated bodies, such as truth commissions, citizens’ advisory boards, and public procurement bodies (Peruzotti and Smulovitz 2006). By drafting citizens onto state committees and involving non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the work of state inspectorates, social accountability blurs the conceptual distinction between horizontal (intra-state) and vertical (state-citizen) accountability (O’Donnell 1998). But what are the political regime implications of various forms of social accountability?

Three key arguments about the political significance of social accountability are discernible in the literature. The first is that, by complementing and supplementing existing accountability institutions between elections, social accountability is essential to the scrutiny of power and political competition required for emerging democracies to consolidate. Consequently, the diversity of social organizations and movements involved in mechanisms of accountability in Latin America in particular over the last decade has given rise to new democratic optimism (Mainwaring and Welna 2003; Peruzotti and Smulovitz 2006). While many such initiatives lack directly enforceable sanctions, writers have emphasized their indirect effects in “turning on the alarm” and “material consequences” (Peruzotti and Smulovitz 2006:16; Fox 2007:13). As Peruzotti and Smulovitz (2006:26) assert, “Social mechanisms constitute an alternative mechanism for imposing costs on political actors and are a necessary condition for the operation of those institutional mechanisms that have mandatory sanctioning capacities.” Theorists placing a premium on checks and balances against state power view such pressures from civil society as integral to the maturing of liberal democracy.

The second argument concerns the broader regime transformative potential of social accountability. Fox (2007:9–11) maintains that, through collective social action and innovations in accountability and participation, social foundations for democratic transitions can be laid even before electoral institutions exist. He emphasizes not the dichotomy between state and civil society, nor the role of the latter in simply checking the power of the former, but the nature of the political relationship between the two. The cleavages that Fox (2007:12) highlight are those within and across state and civil society and the attendant coalitions: “It matters when the forces for and against public accountability can be found on both sides of the state-society divide.” From his perspective, conflict between contending forces “embedded in both state and society” is a driving force for institutional change, although the character of that change is contingent on the nature of the coalitions involved (Fox 2007:12; emphasis original).

A third argument, emerging from international aid agencies, focuses on citizens’ rights and empowerment, especially for the poor. According to the World Bank (2004a), social accountability involves the right to know, question and participate, to better services, to stop corruption, to end poverty, and to demand that commitments are respected. Similarly, for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), social accountability is “the cornerstone of good governance and a prerequisite for effective democracy” because it enhances citizens’ voice, elicited through “dialogues and consultations between policymakers, service providers and citizens, to improve service delivery” (UNDP Pacific Center 2010). Although resonating somewhat with democratic arguments, the notion of voice substitutes for, rather than enhances, a democratic conception of citizens’ authority over government decision making via elected representatives or mobilizing coalitions. World Bank promotion of social accountability has become closely associated with the Bank’s anticorruption agenda, for example through incorporation of social accountability into the Governance and Anti-Corruption Strategy (World Bank 2009). The foregrounding of corruption among the broader range of issues affecting state-society relations narrows social accountability’s political potential.

Moreover, this third approach contrasts sharply with Fox’s view that accountability emerges from conflict between contending forces. The World Bank in particular has seized on social accountability as a less confrontational approach to making demands: “Across the world, we find citizens are mobilizing, often locally, to demand better services. Not by shouting, but by counting. Making sure their governments spend effectively, and keep their promises” (World Bank 2004a). While the Bank has not entirely dismissed the utility of political conflict (see
check and scrutinize the use of state power, democrats are not intrinsically opposed to extensive state powers. Differences exist though over the means by which that authority can be effectively asserted. Mulgan (2000), for example, insists this requires the capacity to use sanctions to discipline agents meant to be acting on citizens’ collective behalf. By contrast, Bovens (2006:9) contends that the essence of democratic accountability is the “obligation to explain and justify” conduct, through a wide range of formal and informal institutional mechanisms inside and outside the state. Yet the abiding ideological assumption here is that citizens have a right to hold those exercising state power to political account.

Underlying such debates is the irresolvable ideological divide between positive and negative approaches to liberty (Berlin 1969). Those that embrace the former are less anxious about constraining state power than ensuring it is responsive to popular aspirations—including through organized, collective political action. Indeed, for analysts who regard democracy under capitalism as entailing inherently unequal distributions of power, class-based and other forms of independent collective political action are essential to protect and advance individual citizens’ rights (Held 2006:79). Fox’s (2007) emphasis on coalition building posits the state as a site of this conflict—and not just an object of it. Yet for those supporting negative liberty, the appeal of liberal democracy has been precisely its potential to limit both the nature of conflict and the manner by which groups seek to hold state power to account.

Despite its historical association with democracy, liberalism has a distinctive agenda. Authority rests with the private, voluntarily contracting individual, and checks and balances on state power are necessary to protect individual autonomy, especially in the marketplace. Consequently, individual action in pursuit of self-interest and reciprocity is privileged over collective action based on relations of solidarity and mutual obligation. Thus, liberals place considerable emphasis on legal, constitutional, and contractual relationships to restrain the ability of state agencies to violate the private sphere. In the process, the discretionary authority vested in people’s representatives is subordinated to the authority of regulations and the rule of law. In contrast to democratic notions of collective action, liberalism promotes individual freedom, economic productivity, and efficient resource allocation as key values against which claims to political authority are judged. The World Bank’s preoccupation with using social accountability to promote anticorruption and more efficient service delivery, rather than to further broaden struggles by the poor over resource distribution, access to welfare, and reduction of inequality, exemplifies liberal concern to harness social accountability to improve the functioning of contracts and markets. But in consequence, liberalism can have antidemocratic implications, when
democratic movements seek to challenge market values (Jayasuriya 2005).

A third ideological category of accountability shifts the emphasis toward morality. This is a capacious category incorporating a potentially infinite range of variants and hybrids, all of which base accountability’s rationale upon a received understanding of correct conduct. The moral approach blurs the distinction between public and private spheres of conduct and subjects both to a moral code based upon an externally constituted authority. This may take the form of: a deity or spiritual teacher, in religious variants; a paternalistic elite, as in monarchical or aristocratic variants; or the dead hand of custom or the civilizing impact of culture, in nationalist, culturalist, or republican variants.

Because the bases for moral ideologies of accountability are so diverse, there may be considerable contestation within this category. For example, classical republicanism, which relies on a notion of civic virtue, has historically sought to curb religious moralism, which holds secular power accountable to a set of beliefs thought to embody divine authority. Different forms of religious moralism also have varying implications for political regimes, because of the divergent interpretations within individual religions of key sources of divine authority. Depending on which position prevails, then, moral approaches to accountability can either promote social conservatism associated with established hierarchies or radical change associated with new philosophical movements or ethical revelations. Even the latter, though, is likely to lead ultimately to the entrenchment of a new hierarchy, as a new set of moral guardians emerges.

The political significance of moral rationales for accountability is that these rationales are sufficiently diverse and flexible that they can be harnessed to support or oppose either liberal or democratic forms of accountability. As we will show in the discussion of the Philippines and Cambodia, hybrid rationales have emerged which combine the liberalism of key international aid donors and the morally based ideologies emerging from Catholicism, in the case of the Philippines, and a complex mix of Khmer nationalism, Vietnamese-style socialism and 1960s monarchical Buddhism in the case of Cambodia. In both cases, this has led to nondemocratic outcomes.

The broader point is that, since the constituents for the three different ideological rationales for accountability necessarily differ from one national setting to another, the prospects of attempts to promote social accountability by international aid agencies will invariably be influenced by the precise complexion and strength of coalitions within and between these ideological camps. Consequently, the export of social accountability techniques from the Philippines to Cambodia via training programs, policy transfer projects, or processes of transnational networking becomes a complex and highly contested affair.

The Social Accountability Context

In both Cambodia and the Philippines, historical and structural factors—especially the Cold War legacies of fragmented or stunted civil societies—are important to the form and prospects of social accountability. In the Philippines, during the period of martial law and authoritarian rule under Marcos (1972–1986), civil society was decimated, with independent collective organizations of the working class and peasants being particular targets of repression (Hilhorst 2003; Abinales and Amoroso 2005). The notable exception was the Catholic Church, whose conservative leadership came to some accommodation with Marcos. Shared hostility toward communism and Marcos’ desire for regime legitimacy in a predominantly Catholic country resulted in what Bishops described as “critical collaboration” with the state (Barry 2006:158). In Cambodia, the legacy of American intervention in Indochina was decades of severe repression of leftist groups, from independence to the mid-1970s, followed by the violence of forced collectivization, conscription, and insurgency from 1975 to 1991. By the end of the Cold War, there were few civil associations remaining in the country; even the Buddhist establishment was severely diminished in influence, while mass organizations associated with the ruling communist party struggled to elicit compliance, from subsistence farmers to socialist policies.

The closing stages of the Cold War saw the beginnings of change. By the mid-1980s, the decay of Marcos’ crony capitalist regime in the Philippines reached such a point that urban mass mobilizations could not be prevented, while business and middle class anxiety mounted over state corruption and disintegrating political order. Against this background, the Church hierarchy abandoned Marcos. It threw support instead behind the politically moderate and devout Catholic presidential aspirant Corazon Aquino, playing a pivotal role mobilizing People Power (also known as EDSA) support for army rebels that precipitated the regime’s collapse (Abinales and Amoroso 2005:221–226). Subsequently, “an avalanche of foreign support” fostered a proliferation of NGOs (Constantino-David 1998:37). In Cambodia, the 1989 withdrawal of the Vietnamese army and the impending cessation of Soviet aid prompted parties to the civil war to accept a United Nations peacekeeping operation, which incorporated international support for democratic institutions such as elections and new civil society organizations.

In addition to substantial foreign aid, civil society re-emergence in both countries was supported by new constitutional and legislative guarantees. Yet in the Philippines, “the progressive NGOs increasingly fragmented into multiple communities and non-communities,” and the Catholic Church consequently remained a dominant force (Hilhorst 2003:14). In Cambodia, NGOs were largely urban-based and lacked significant memberships. Many oriented their activities to a great extent toward attracting foreign
funding. More so than in the Philippines, repeated threats of political repression against activist trade unions, journalists, and NGOs entailed continued restrictions on freedom to engage in criticism of government policies.

In both countries, political parties lacked meaningful social bases or programmatic reform agendas. Conspicuously absent was a strong social democratic party aligning labor and middle class groups, as had been characteristic of earlier democratic movements in Western Europe. In the Philippines, the legacy of Marcos’ labor repression combined with the rise of neoliberal globalization pressures to render this unlikely (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2009:25–26). Deep ideological and tactical divisions between moderate reformers, radical reformers, and revolutionaries were also crucial obstacles in post-Marcos Philippines to the forging of more coherent collective democratic forces including the labor movement (Franco 2001:201–267). In Cambodia, opposition party efforts to build a support-base within the nascent trade union movement in the garment industry were inhibited by international intervention from agencies such as the International Labor Organization, which sought to depoliticize Cambodian trade unions (Hughes 2007). In rural areas, in both countries, the power of oligarchs and tycoons helped ensure that party politics represented principally a vehicle through which patronage could be dispensed (Silliman and Noble 1998:281–282; Hughes 2003:60–67).

Against these backgrounds, it is unsurprising that intra- and inter-elite conflicts over state power continue to dominate political reform debates. Concepts of democratic reform that could empower labor and the poor struggle for preeminence amid a plethora of liberal and morally based critiques. Since the late 1990s, ideas about democracy have in both countries become conflated with notions of good governance promoted by international aid agencies and international business. These ideas have been harnessed by elites attempting to use foreign aid interventions to entrench existing power hierarchies.

The Church’s role in the 2001 People Power II mobilization that culminated in an extraordinary coup against the democratically elected President Joseph Estrada in the Philippines was self-portrayed as “an extension of the continuing relevance of the Church as a facilitator of good governance” (Bautista 2009:9). Yet the show of almost exclusively working class and poor Filipino support for the populist Estrada in People Power III was precisely a function of the absence of effective collective organizations to advance these people’s interests. Estrada’s ability to exploit this vacuum was as unsettling for the established oligarchs and the middle class as his penchant for corruption (Hedman 2006:171; Hutchison 2006).

Similarly, the Cambodian People’s Party’s resurgence on the back of expansive programs of rural patronage in the 2002–2008 boom years reflects a lack of alternatives in the countryside, as middle class NGOs focus on good governance rather than democratic reform and business groups have retained close relations with the government. It is in these contexts that social accountability movements have been founded in the 2000s, with profound effects for both their ideological framing and political regime impacts.

**Philippine Social Accountability: Anticorruption and Procurement Reform**

The extent of social accountability initiatives in the Philippines is such that it has been proclaimed, alongside India, as the Asia-Pacific regional leader in social accountability (World Bank Institute 2005). Consequently, Filipino trainers and activists have been exported under World Bank programs to countries such as Cambodia to spread information and build capacity for social accountability.

The passing of the Government Procurement Reform Act (PRA) in 2002 was a landmark Philippines social accountability achievement, institutionalizing national civil society–state partnerships including incorporating societal actors onto the Bids and Awards Committees (BACs) responsible for awarding public sector contracts. Crucially, while democratic notions of accountability were significant within the transnational and national coalitions supporting the PRA, they were also often subordinated to, or articulated in conjunction with, liberal and moral rationales. Thus, although the political authority of citizens to scrutinize state power is advanced through the PRA, this has largely been, particularly in the implementation phase, on the basis of directing civil society energies toward demanding technical and administrativestasks to improve governance. While helping consolidate coalitions between domestic business and middle class critics of corruption and attracting support from external funding agencies, this orientation also places limits on the scope for critical evaluation of the reform agenda by diverting efforts for building stronger and more cohesive grassroots constituency representation so fundamental to democracy.

The key coalition involved in social accountability initiatives associated with the PRA was the Transparency and Accountability Network (TAN), formed in November 2000. Comprising 19 NGOs, TAN included elements of the private sector, academia, and assorted social and religious organizations who shared concern about the lack of transparency and the prevalence of corruption in the Estrada Administration. TAN’s strategy to foster improved governance included embracing social accountability, support for which has come from several international donors.

While TAN was involved in efforts resulting in the passing of the PRA, another alliance of NGOs, the Coalition Against Corruption (CAC), was formed in 2004 to monitor compliance with the Act. CAC activities extend to the monitoring of textbook and medicine procurement, internal revenue allotments for local government, Priority Development Assistance (Pork Barrel), and the lifestyle of public officials.
CAC membership is a Who’s Who of social accountability in the Philippines, overlapping with, but extending on, the TAN network by incorporating even stronger Church involvement.

Although CAC contains diverse ideologies and interests, members appear united in the view of its chairman Jose Cuisia Jr. (quoted in Isip 2009) that “corruption is the gravest threat to Philippine democracy and society today.” From a liberal perspective, corruption in procurement contract awards, and corruption more generally, obstructs market competition and distorts prices. However, depicting anticorruption governance reform as simultaneously the most effective assault on poverty has also been this coalition’s hallmark (see, for example, MAP 2008:5).

Important as arresting corruption is to eradicating poverty, its portrayal as the primary solution has ideological effects, diverting attention from wider issues of wealth and power distribution resulting from market relations and from consideration of whether socioeconomically disadvantaged groups have adequate political representation. Furthermore, the use of social accountability to combat corruption has steered NGO energies away from coalition building among the poor toward technical work of monitoring compliance.

The initial driving force to enact the PRA comprised a coalition of state bureaucrats and international aid agencies. At one level, this coalition embraced a standard contemporary liberal critique of corruption as rooted in state capture by narrow interests and maladministration by officials, the solution being better governance through more transparency and accountability within which competitive market forces are central. At another level, a concerted political strategy to champion and implement reforms was hatched that included engaging and harnessing social and political forces (Campos and Syquia 2006). And coalition building did not stop with the passing of the PRA. Instead, the Church, which had hitherto channeled its fight against corruption elsewhere, became heavily involved in implementing social accountability mechanisms for public procurement. Its vast organizational networks have been crucial to the recruitment, training, and authority of the societal involvement in the BAC.

Broadly, stages in the conception, mobilization of support for, and implementation of the PRA corresponded with the respective primary influence at the time of liberal, democratic, and moral approaches within accountability coalitions.

First moves toward public procurement reform can be traced to the efforts of the US-trained economist Benjamin Diokno, appointed in 1998 to head the Philippines Department of Budget and Management (DBM). His concerns about the budgeting system and procurement prompted him to seek help from USAID, resulting initially in two US-based procurement experts working within DBM for six months to produce a draft on requisite legislative reforms. By early 2000, an extensive USAID technical assistance program was funding workshops, short-term consultancies, and other activities linking DBM with support and advice from USAID and other donors as part of a Technical Agreement (TA). An early TA team priority was to ensure officials from DBM and other key Philippines agencies supported a new comprehensive procurement law. Toward this end, a Technical Working Group (TWG) was established to work with the Budget Reform Task Force (BRTF) and the TA team. The resulting parliamentary bill was endorsed by the House of Representatives. However, the Estrada imbroglio and imminent election concerns of senators resulted in the 11th Congress concluding before any further progress (Campos and Syquia 2006:11).

At this point, members of the TWG, the BRTF, and the TA team also concluded that links with civil society were needed to knit together the expertise and organizational ingredients for social accountability. Accordingly, in February 2001, the NGO Procurement Watch Inc. (PWI) was formed, funded by a grant from the World Bank managed by the DBM. PWI was to specialize in procurement training and monitoring, but it soon became clear that its advocacy role would be critical. Estrada’s removal represented a hiatus in the anticorruption movement; the challenge now was to ensure President Arroyo, and other parliamentarians still saw the urgency of procurement reform (Campos and Syquia 2006:16–17; Thornton 2006).

PWI targeted TAN in attempting to galvanize civil society support. Before long, TAN had prepared a manifesto endorsing the passage of a new procurement law containing 10 principles, including the incorporation of NGOs onto BACs. TAN urged the Chairman of the Committee on Constitutional Amendments in the Philippine Senate to give priority to these principles and the procurement bills in the new Congress. Meanwhile, PWI was invited to join TAN. While PWI sought to cultivate various other smaller civil society groups, it was the TAN alliance that was most significant in connecting reformist elements of the state bureaucracy and their supporters among aid agencies with Philippine civil society. What ensued was a sustained and well-coordinated political campaign resulting in the PRA becoming law in January 2003 (Campos and Syquia 2006:25–30). This was the democratic highpoint of the movement: the assertion of civil society authority as the imperative for change.

In supporting the legislation, Senator Edgardo J. Angara asserted that, “The evil of corruption is robbing our people of essential services such as schooling, health, food and housing” (quoted in *Philippines Star* 2002). Once the PRA was passed, though, emphasis shifted from the rights of the poor to the technical concern of monitoring compliance with detailed and complex regulations and processes. The PRA covers any procurements involving infrastructure projects, goods and consulting services in national and local government departments, agencies, bureaus, and offices. The declared principles
embedded in the legislation include the desire to ensure competitiveness and equal opportunity for private contracting parties, transparency, and uniformity in the application of the procurement process, accountability of public officials and public monitoring of the procurement process, and the implementation of awarded contracts to ensure compliance with the Act. The composition and powers of the BAC are critical to accountability of officials and monitoring of the procurement process.

The BAC’s roles include determining the eligibility of prospective bidders, evaluating bids, and recommending the award of contracts. The BAC, comprising a minimum of five and maximum of seven members, is chaired by a senior official of the procuring entity (other than its head) but, in addition to including a representative of the Commission on Audit, is required to have at least two observers sitting in on proceedings: “one from a duly recognized private group in a sector or discipline relevant to the procurement at hand, and the other from a non-government organization” (Republic of the Philippines 2003:9). In recognition of the technical demands on observers, and indeed procuring entities and others, the Government Procurement Policy Board (GPPB) is tasked with ensuring suitable training programs for all involved. As subsequent proposed amendments to the Act clarified, observers should have: “Knowledge, experience or expertise in procurement or in the subject matter of the contract to be bid” (Escudero 2007:18). Where observers believe the procurement process does not comply with the Act, they can submit a report to the Office of the Ombudsman, copied to the GPPB, explaining how.

The technical expertise and organizational capacities of civil society groups are integral to the training and recruitment of observers on the BACs and the monitoring of compliance with the Act. Accordingly, PWI’s task has been both enhanced and narrowed, as it plays a pivotal role in training other NGOs, state officials, and individual volunteers about the procurement process. Its role has thus changed from a confrontational, overtly political, and explicitly democratic one in the campaign to get the Act passed, to a mainly technical role. According to PWI’s Supervising Technical Officer, Caroline Belisario (2009), the principal question now is whether “procurement is efficient and is it based on good quantification process” and civil society-government relationships introduced under the PRA must be “non-adversarial and non-confrontational partnerships.”

Another change following the passage of the Act was the role of the Church, whose formal organizations had not been integral to the coalitions that secured the PRA, but which became important to the PRA’s implementation. Church disinterest in the political campaign for the PRA stemmed not from indifference to corruption. Rather, many in the Church hierarchy saw the problem as fundamentally a moral and cultural one to be addressed accordingly. Support of the urban poor for Estrada in particular had shocked Church leaders (CEC 2003:iii). From May 2003, the Jesuit order’s Committee on the Evangelization of Culture embarked on a major campaign of moral education to arrest corruption and bolster accountability through the Ehem! Program (CEC 2003:xii). The emphasis was heavily on the need for a sense of civic and moral duty within both public institutions and civil society. Whereas many other anticorruption measures concentrate on monitoring power holders, it was explained at the Ehem! launch that this was “more geared toward changing the mindsets of ordinary people, who appear to have become tolerant, if not downright supportive, of corruption” (Araya 2003). Corruption was thus portrayed as part of humankind’s broader moral fallibility.

Speaking at the Bishop-Businessmen’s Conference General Assembly of July 8, 2004, President Arroyo requested the Church’s assistance to implement the PRA. By late 2004, not only was the Church involved in helping to train BAC observers, through the Council of the Laity of the Philippines (LAIKO) and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), but it had also become an important CAC member.

The desire to address the moral basis to accountability emphasized in Ehem! is at the fore in the CBCP-LAIKO approach to training BAC observers. For example, when requested by the Social Security System (SSS) to train its BAC and support staff, LAIKO’s Advocacy for Good Governance Committee designed a module that was infused with moral values education. The result was a two-day Holy Retreat in October 2007 for members of the BAC and TWG of SSS, which included a presentation on “The Moral Responsibility of Public Servants” by Bishop Gabriel V. Reyes, LAIKO National Director, and a mass and homily citing a gospel parable to draw out implications for those seeking to get rich through corruption (CBCP News 2007).

Meanwhile, particularly through the work of Jesuit academics at the Ateneo University, Catholic activists were involved in a range of social accountability watchdog mechanisms and CAC criticisms of authorities over corruption. By 2008, much of the latter was targeted at Arroyo (Quimpo 2010:55–57). Significantly, while this included aligning with democratic forces and ideologies, CBCP President and Archbishop of Jaro, Angel Lagdameo (2008) explained that democracy must be morally and spiritually based and centered on the defeat of corruption:

It is through internal conversion into the maturity of Christ through communal and prayerful discernment and action that the roots of corruption are discovered and destroyed. We believe that such communal action will perpetuate at the grassroots level the spirit of People Power so brilliantly demonstrated to the world at EDSA I. It is People Power with a difference. From the grassroots will come out a culture of truth and integrity we so deeply seek and build.
In effect, citizens’ political participation through social accountability mechanisms and institutions—whether inspired by liberal or democratic ideologies—cannot combat corruption (the central political problem) without the right individual moral ingredients. Here the Church positions itself as the preeminent authority on, and guardian of, Filipino morals: a claim to political and not just religious authority.

In the context of increasing preoccupation of civil society groups with monitoring PRA implementation, concern has emerged about cooptation. Indeed, the possibility of cooptation is one that NGOs in the Philippines constantly face (Hedman 2006; Reid 2008). Some civil society participants refer to the risks of being used as “deodorizers” of smelly deals, helping to give the appearance of close and effective scrutiny of public procurement (Belisario 2009; Lazatin 2009; Lugay 2009; Parafina 2009). This was particularly evident in the reaction of civil society groups to President Arroyo’s creation of a Procurement Transparency Group (PTG) in late 2007, headed by the GPPB and involving five government agencies and five NGOs.

With a brief to evaluate and monitor procurement activities, the purpose of PTG aroused suspicion among activists who saw this as duplicating the roles of the Ombudsman and existing BACs. Indeed, TAN Executive Director, Vincent Lazatin (2009), was of the impression from discussions with authorities that the real motivation behind PTG was to “ensure that procurements don’t hit the headlines.” TAN, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Japan International Cooperation Agency jointly wrote to the Office of the President arguing that if transparency provisions within the PRA were strengthened, the PTG would not be necessary. It was only after concessions boosting civil society representation, abandoning the idea of only examining procurements of P100 million, and an agreement to publicly release the same information available to the PTG, that TAN agreed to be involved (Lazatin 2009).

Similarly, civil society actors have reservations over restrictions implicit on their monitoring of corruption under the PRA. Observers are invited to the procurement process starting at the pre-bid conference up until the opening and evaluation of bids. Yet as Lazatin (2009) observes, “you can have a perfectly clean procurement between those bookends.” Meanwhile, “there are practices that happen prior to the pre-bid conference where decisions are made among bidders—sometimes including government officials with regards to how that procurement will proceed and so, even before the pre-bid conference, the result is in sight” (Lazatin 2009). Echoing this view, LAIKO’s Jose B. Lugay (2009) contends that: “An outside representative, like the NGO observer of the BAC, must have a sharp eye to detect circumstances conducive to collusion.” However, a high degree of technical knowledge, or access to it, may sometimes be needed to sense such possible circum-

stances. Costing for road construction, for example, includes prices for soil, cement, and equipment but, according to Lazatin (2009), “you have to be a very technical person to reverse engineer that calculation and see if it’s okay.”

To be sure, the roles of BAC observers and recourse to the PTG have produced some significant instances of arresting corruption. For example, LAIKO acted on behalf of the Church-based NGO Dila- Kab Foundation in a successful appeal to the PTG of Malacanang, when BAC observers’ concerns of suspected irregularities in the awarding of large-scale projects by the National Irrigation Office in Cebu were earlier disregarded.

However, the challenges of ensuring adequate numbers of observers sufficiently equipped technically to serve on the BACs, let alone lodge reports on concerns about the procurement process, are considerable. PWI estimates that of the 8,000 trained observers needed only about 800 existed by the end of 2009 (IBP 2009). Added to this is the logistical problem of matching requisite technical expertise among trained observers with the geographical location of BAC meetings. Meanwhile, local government institutions in particular that do not invite observers to BAC meetings cannot easily be disciplined since the GPPB is unable to satisfy all requests for trained observers. Preventing government institutions inviting observers from “friendly” organizations is difficult for the same reason. Moreover, many serving as observers representing civil society or professional groups are retirees or on low incomes, whose lack of administrative and secretarial support can impede lodging reports about suspected corruption.

In short, while the PRA has opened up avenues for increasing accountability, the practical demands consume a disproportionate civil society effort in technical rather than political exercises. An even more pervasive aspect of this is the ideological framing of corruption as the principal political and moral problem confronting the Philippines to be rectified through better-designed governance institutions. Those institutions are intended, above all else, to ensure the forces of market competition are not blunted, but maximized to curb corruption. With the problem of, and solution to, corruption defined in this way, alternative reform priorities are either subordinated or marginalized altogether. In particular, conceptions of corruption as symptomatic of structurally rooted social conflicts and consideration of the implications of this for mechanisms of political accountability and representation do not resonate with the non-adversarial state–civil society partnership model ascendant among the Philippine middle class. Consequently, although there is now an external check on the exercise of state power, this is a check that must, by its nature, be performed by technocrats and experts, rather than by citizens per se. The effect is to contain the political space for contestation and reform imagination.
Social Accountability in Cambodia: From Anticorruption to Decentralization

Within Cambodia, social accountability’s preeminent influence is in government decentralization reforms. Significantly, despite the interests and influence of international agencies, anticorruption has not been a social accountability focus, as in the Philippines. Unlike in the Philippines, where business interests played an important role, social accountability in Cambodia has been primarily donor-driven. Business groups are unwilling to promote an anticorruption agenda, since they regard the predatory and patronage-oriented Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) as key to political stability and a continued flow of lucrative state contracts. Consequently, efforts by local NGOs working with international agencies to promote moral, liberal, or democratic agendas with respect to corruption have been successfully repressed by the government.

As the Cold War wound down, privatization of land and other natural resources disadvantaged the subsistence sector of the economy in favor of well-connected investors. From near equality in 1989, the distribution of wealth in Cambodia has become one of the most unequal in Asia (Guimbert 2009). During the 2002–2008 economic boom, the CPP, under Prime Minister Hun Sen, awarded tracts of land and forest to Cambodian tycoons and foreign investors prepared to support the Party’s platform. In return for preferential treatment, businessmen made large donations to party-sponsored development projects across the rural heartland, building schools, roads, and irrigation schemes. Spending on these projects outstripped state development budgets and boosted support for the CPP, despite high levels of economic misery and political contestation in both peripheral and urban areas.

This political model, combining predation with neo-patrimonialism, differs substantially from liberal prescriptions for good governance. Eliciting donations from businesses and spending these on politicized development projects requires maintenance, by political leaders, of absolute discretion over procurement contracts and budgets. It militates against the emergence of authoritative regulatory regimes.

Consequently, corruption has not figured prominently in the social accountability agenda—quite the reverse. Indeed, the government has signaled displeasure over international support for civil society movements against corruption. Although Cambodia finally passed an anticorruption law in early 2010 in response to international pressure, certain provisions in the law—such as the article mandating up to six months’ imprisonment for whistleblowers making accusations that “lead to fruitless investigations” (Royal Government of Cambodia 2010a: article 41; my translation)—seem certain to render it ineffective.

In other issue areas, the political coalition dominating the CPP has been more accepting of international social accountability promotion. The World Bank in 2008 launched a US$20 million Demand for Good Governance (DFGG) program, with the collaboration of the Cambodian Ministry of Interior (MoI). Announcing the project, the Bank took a liberal approach explicitly linked to anticorruption (see World Bank 2008a). However, World Bank officials familiar with Cambodia are more tentative in claiming that the program might have an impact on corruption. They suggest a cautious approach to lay the groundwork for more modest forms of accountability (Bhargava 2009).

The DFGG emerged from the Bank’s evaluations of the role of civil society in promoting good governance in Cambodia. These concluded that social accountability techniques could harness civil society organizations more effectively to “demand-side” good governance initiatives (Burke and Vanna 2005; Malena and Chhim 2009). In making these assessments, the World Bank drew explicitly on its own “demand-side” agenda, seeking to shift civil society activism “from shouting to counting.” This prompted the Bank to launch a Program for Enhancing Capacity for Social Accountability (PECSA) in Cambodia in 2008. PECSA incorporated four goals: training civil society organizations in social accountability techniques, adapting what were called “global accountability practices” to the Cambodian context, providing grants for experimenting with social accountability, and supporting networking between social accountability groups. PECSA entailed 5-week intensive “social accountability schools” run by trainers imported from Ateneo University’s School of Government. Students were taken to see social accountability in action in the Philippines and in India, reflecting the World Bank’s view of social accountability as primarily a technical mechanism or set of capacities for promoting reform, rather than a contextually embedded political movement.

The DFGG built upon PECSA, offering US$4 million in grants to nongovernment actors to form partnerships with government institutions in social accountability projects. Selected state agencies, already experimenting with accountability practices, were also assisted (Bhargava 2009). To ensure political support, DFGG was launched following extensive discussions with government officials, and is run through a Project Coordination Office based in the MoI. Given the Cambodian government’s lack of interest in anticorruption campaigns, what ideological agenda(s) does this program serve, and to what extent does it involve a migration of political authority away from existing power holders and toward citizens more broadly?

For the World Bank, the significance is twofold. DFGG provides an opportunity to initiate new modes of accountability within state institutions. Although the institutions selected are marginal to the key areas of natural resource management and land, and consequently do not directly tackle the political economy of corruption underpinning CPP power, Bank officials suggest that they do offer opportunities for
the government to experiment with new ways of working. According to a Bank official who led the project in its inception phase:

We know there are certain things that are off-limits... The government will make sure that line is not crossed... We are trying to close the gap between what is theoretically possible and what is actually happening. Without pushing the frontier, we can do a lot that isn’t being done. (Bhargava 2009)

Second, the program provides an opportunity to reduce distrust between the Cambodian government and civil society, fostering “a culture of constructive engagement that NSAs [Non-State Actors] would carry over to other contexts” (World Bank 2008b).

Interviews with senior government officials suggest a different conceptualization of accountability. Secretary of State of the MoI, Ngy Chanphal, who heads the DFGG Project Coordination Office, noted in an interview that (within government), when translated into Khmer, the program was called the “Local Good Governance Project” rather than the “Demand for Good Governance Project,” because:

There was some complaint about the title. The word demand means demanding, imposing forcefully. This is not really good... So when the World Bank brought this project we changed the title in Khmer to Local Good Governance Project. In Khmer we would not accept this kind of demand. (Ngy 2009)

The government’s careful use of terminology is indicative of concern to impose a particular ideological framework. The decision to substitute “demand” with “local” aligns the program with government experimentation with decentralization. It is here that powerful political coalitions of support for a particular ideological approach to social accountability can be most clearly identified.

Decentralization of government is regarded in recent development orthodoxy as providing increasing accountability by reducing the costs to the poor of organizing to demand better service. The Cambodian government has declared a concern to promote what it calls “democratic development” at local level via decentralization of governance, and in this area appears to be genuinely embracing new forms of social accountability.

Underlying this embrace are two concerns central to the CPP’s political strategy. The CPP consistently campaigns on its ability to “get things done.” The power to mobilize resources and deliver tangible local development goods is central to the Party’s image and dominates television news broadcasts. The state—business relationship reflects this: private tycoons vie with one another to contribute donations to Party “good works” in return for receiving honors such as the title of Okhna, bestowed when one has contributed US$100,000 to these development projects. The material benefits of such a title are significant: of 19 contracts to develop Special Economic Zones awarded to Cambodian businesses, for example, 13 were awarded to Okhnas (Royal Government of Cambodia 2010b). Some of these Okhnas have also been identified by NGO Global Witness (2007:11) as recipients of lucrative logging concessions and large agro-industrial land concessions (Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2010). Three Okhnas have also been appointed to parliament as CPP senators.

High-ranking government officials from Phnom Penh ministries are allocated districts, within which they are responsible for coordinating development projects paid for via the state budget, international aid projects, and private donations. Ministers and Secretaries of State spend their weekends overseeing these projects in liaison with district party working groups, who in turn liaise with elected commune councils.

Moral ideas of accountability mesh well with this system. Secretary of State Ngy Chanphal (2009) commented on the improved coordination between central and local government since the election of commune councils began in 2002, and the significance of this for the CPP’s national electoral strategy:

The new civil servants should not be the master of the people, but the public servants. We want to make services better: we are trying, working as a political party, we are required to work in our home districts. Now what happens down there—people bring it back to the government to hear... Buying votes is not going to help. We have to prove that we work well and explain government policy, really do things. We have to be involved in infrastructure etcetera. The people see it. And you cannot trust that they will vote for you if you don’t do this.

This policy of working at the grassroots to mobilize participation and support is integral to the CPP’s hold on power (Craig and Kimchoeun Forthcoming). Government officials such as Ngy Chanphal (2009) describe the system as a form of homegrown democracy: “Now we have a very democratic society—from the grassroots up, this is not imported from somewhere... Doing reform and economic development, ensuring the sustainability of the livelihood of the people is the main objective.” Some analysts have regarded this as a shift from the elite patronage surrounding forestry in the 1990s, used to cement the CPP’s political alliances and end the Khmer Rouge insurgency, to a form of mass patronage that could represent a precursor to democracy (Craig and Kimchoeun Forthcoming).

However, the ideological underpinnings of this system are different from those of democratic accountability. While liberal and democratic terminology is freely appropriated in government documents, the system has more in common with a hybrid socialist and nationalist ideology of moral solidarity between leaders and peasants that has long been familiar in Cambodian political rhetoric. It reprises a long-standing assertion by Cambodian socialist regimes of
a historically given commonality of purpose among various classes in achieving social and economic progress, conceptualized as preservation of public order, combined with more efficient infrastructure and service delivery. Since the 1990s, a Khmer culturalist and nationalist version of this has been articulated, which combines the language of modernization with symbols of cultural authenticity, such as patronage of Buddhist temples, and detailed attention to traditional rituals of etiquette and rank. A particularly powerful motif has been that of development as a “gift” given by meritorious benefactors to the poor out of a sense of moral obligation. This combines ideas of socialist mobilization for development with Buddhist conceptions of merit making and compassion (Hughes 2006).

There is a sharp disjuncture between this approach and democratic accountability. Despite the rhetoric of public service and rituals of popular participation, this *noblesse oblige* approach differs from democratic control of development trajectories. Political authority remains firmly in the hands of the elites who provide the funding, organization, and security within which local development needs can be met. Citizens have no opportunity to exercise authority over the broader nature and purposes of Cambodia’s development trajectory. The Special Economic Zones and Economic Land Concessions that form the key to the government’s industrialization strategy and provide the profits which fund the CPP’s notion of “rural development” have never been publicly debated in any forum that offers a voice to the poor. They represent the outcome of backroom deals between elite networks.

The CPP’s model of “democratic” development thus substitutes mobilization of participation into predetermined agendas for a shift of political authority from elite to masses. It imposes rigid hierarchies of benevolence and gratitude, while creating means for better information about mismanagement of resources to flow up through party—not state—structures. This has improved the atmosphere within Cambodian villages, in comparison with the widespread climate of fear that prevailed in previous decades, but allows only the most limited of debates over government “effectiveness.”

The DFGG accords with this approach. Opportunities for citizens to monitor government activities, for example through audits and report cards, can be oriented to Party needs. Social accountability mechanisms supply higher levels of government with data they can use to discipline and control local level officials. They can encourage citizens to join with government in ironing out questions of effectiveness, rather than to develop autonomous citizens’ movements that might challenge the government for control over decision making.

Like the Philippines’ PRA, then, the DFGG risks absorbing activists in technical and administrative questions, as opposed to coalition building activities that can empower the poor. This implies limited ability to tackle issues, such as corruption, on which the government does not wish to implement reform. DFGG requires, as a condition of receiving grant funding, conformity to principles of “constructive engagement” between NGOs and government. This potentially reinforces a division already drawn by the Cambodian government, between NGOs doing “good works” in village development and NGOs confronting the government via advocacy initiatives in the heavily contested areas of access for the poor to land and natural resources. The constructive engagement clause in the DFGG project document is played down by World Bank officials as merely a requirement that “someone in government knows what you are planning to do and is prepared to listen—otherwise what is the point in doing it?” (Bhargava 2009). For Ngy Chanphal (2009), the clause has more significance:

> The NGOs have to understand the reform agenda of the government. We will not provide funding to NGOs who want to bring the government down. We want to improve service delivery and build a partnership together.

Ngy went on to note that only a small number of NGOs, working in areas of human rights and corruption, departed from this model and had an “attitude of unconstructive engagement.” He commented that such NGOs would be kept out of the program because “We can’t afford to have fighting with each other—democracy is not mature yet” (Ngy 2009).

The distinction drawn between “political” and “local development” NGOs is useful to the government. For the MoI, local development NGOs can help the central Ministry to monitor the practices of local government and make up for any shortfalls at a time of rapid change: “civil society can help to monitor subnational councils, work with subnational councils at district and province level and bring more local knowledge” (Ngy 2009). In a context where many of Cambodia’s NGOs are highly dependent on external funding, the US$4 million available via DFGG allows the MoI to consolidate its relationship with “constructive” NGOs (Ngy 2009).

The involvement of NGOs in a government-framed vision of reform at the expense of contestation over resource distributions suggests potential to use social accountability mechanisms as “deodorizers” of an authoritarian move to dispossess the poor of the right to use and access Cambodia’s resource base. In Cambodia’s contemporary political economy, subsistence farmers can no longer access unused land or forest products as of customary right; they must rely instead on gifts from government-aligned NGOs and benefactors for their survival. Their participation in politics risks being confined, in part via social accountability mechanisms, to comments on the effectiveness with which these goods are delivered. Viewed in this light, social accountability emerges as a means for the government to perfect already powerful systems of grassroots
cooptation associated with the provision of small-scale development programs.

Therefore, the level of threat surrounding NGO work is significant. The scope available to Cambodian NGOs who participated in the PECSA and DFGG programs to push the boundaries of government tolerance for criticism is limited. NGO graduates from the PECSA program questioned whether entry into DFGG-style partnerships would allow more assertive engagement with government on contentious issues like corruption:

What is the benefit for NGOs from this? There is no clear answer... There must be consultation first, to figure out whether they [the government] are willing or not. If we start monitoring the budget, how they spend it, the relationship will be put into question. There must be clear points to say that if you do things in the good governance area and get some pressure from the police, or from the provincial governor, you can come to us, there is a mechanism, or something like that (Soeung 2009).

Another graduate who went on the India visit commented that democracy is a prerequisite for, rather than result of, social accountability: “The Indian government is very democratic: because of full democracy, the level of threat is almost zero. People can say what they want to say” (Soeung 2009).

In Cambodia, by contrast, this interviewee suggested, “the government is not happy to work with politically assertive NGOs (Soeung 2009). Thus, from the NGO perspective, the DFGG risks reinforcing, rather than eradicating, the divide between acceptable and unacceptable forms of criticism, and reasserting the area of natural resources—land and forestry governance—in particular as a no-go area for assertive struggle on the part of civil society.

Conclusion

These cases indicate how democratic values form a highly contingent rather than a necessary aspect of social accountability movements. Both cases demonstrate the dangers of cooptation, with activists being drawn into technical mechanisms of monitoring—often under the auspices of international aid agencies—at the expense of broad political coalition building and mobilization of democratic forces. The cases show how liberal ideologies can intersect with socially conservative moral rhetoric to form the basis of nondemocratic coalitions for social accountability. By thus rendering nondemocratic rule more efficient, social accountability can actually make political struggles over highly contested issues such as corruption less effective.

Historical and structural trajectories help mediate the political impact of social accountability mechanisms. In both cases, the legacy of Cold War authoritarian regimes has been deeply fragmented civil societies, which entails that authority does not naturally migrate to economically disadvantaged groups under social accountability mechanisms. Rather, social accountability mechanisms can become tools for authoritarian forces within broader coalitions, shoring up hierarchies of power and the political authority of existing elites through liberal administrative techniques and conservative notions of morality. This can play out in a variety of ways: in the Philippines, it reinforces the power of the Church and the hold of discourses of human fallibility rather than political injustice as the source of social problems. In Cambodia, it assists in the promotion of an image of the Party as a benevolent channel of communication between the elite and the masses, facilitating effective development of rural villages in a context of Khmer nationalist solidarity. This serves Party legitimacy strategies ahead of rectifying the failure of electoral processes in Cambodia to secure adequate representation for the poor.

Importantly, this study is not dismissive of the democratic potential of social accountability and a constructive role to that end by international aid agencies. Indeed, as the Philippines case study demonstrated, there were points in the PRA reform movement when that happened. However, the political authority of citizens to shape and contest reform agendas through independent collective political action is not always integral to social accountability mechanisms. The extent to which it depends principally on what interests and ideologies are ascendant within coalitions for social accountability.

References


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