Ideas on Leaders and Current Issues among Cambodian Students

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ABSTRACT

Using data gathered in a course on leadership, this paper examines two key perspectives from Cambodian university students: i) who they see as effective leaders, and ii) which current issues and problems they believe are the most critical ones facing their country. The results show that these students often see family members, especially their fathers, as the leaders they look up to the most, followed by Cambodia's long-ruling former monarch, King Norodom Sihanouk. American Presidents, especially Barack Obama, were also a common choice. Regarding important current issues, the data shows that education, traffic, environmental issues, and corruption all take a prominent place in these students' minds.

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INTRODUCTION

Like any country, Cambodia needs effective leadership to solve the problems it faces and help it develop into a modern country whose citizens enjoy a comfortable standard of living. Amongst Cambodia's university students are many of its next generation of leaders. What type of leaders will they be, and what will be their main priorities? Only time will tell, but we can get a good idea of the answers by looking at the answers to two related questions: first, who do Cambodian university students see as effective leaders? Second, what are the issues that these students see as the main problems confronting their country now? The answers provided by the students provide a sense of who these students are and what type of leaders they may become as they develop into Cambodia's future leaders.

Methodology and Limitations

The data used in this paper was gathered through surveys given directly to students of the Leadership Philosophy class at CamEd Business School from the second term of 2015 through the first term of 2017. This Leadership class is a required class for all first-year students in the B.A. program at the school.

Table 1 shows the classes and students for each term that comprises the data set:

Table 1

Year	Term	# of Classes	# of Students
2014	2	6	348
2015	2	8	404
2016	1	4	212
2016	2	5	246
2017	1	4	243

To gather the data on leaders, students were asked to write down the names of people who they considered to be "good or effective leaders." Students were allowed to choose anyone: alive or dead, local or foreign, famous or not, as long as the person was a real person (i.e., not a character from a movie, book, etc.). However, not all students from all years received this question. The leader data comes the classes in 2016 (both terms) and 2017 (Term 1). Moreover, the data is (unintentionally) weighted towards the 2016 classes because students in these classes were allowed to choose up to two leaders, while the students in the 2017 classes were only asked to choose one person.

Students were asked to identify these leaders on the first or second day of class. The activity was done this early in the class in order to get a better understanding of the preconceptions the students held of leaders; that is, before they had studied leadership in the classroom setting, as the class might change their preconceptions.

In addition to the question on leaders, students were also asked to identify "the biggest problems or issues facing Cambodia today." This question was given to students in 2015 (Term 2) and 2016 (Term 1). Each of these students was allowed to "vote" for up to two issues.

Students in all classes and terms were also required to complete a group project over the course of the class. The groups, which were comprised of seven to ten students each, were responsible for identifying a problem and doing something to help solve it for a community in Cambodia. The only criteria for their choice was that the project had to be big enough to take several hours of work to complete, but small enough that the students could make a real impact on that community.

WHO ARE EFFECTIVE LEADERS?

In the academic field of leadership studies, there is no consensus on the best definition of "leadership." Indeed, there seem to be as many definitions of "leadership" as there are people who study it. Despite, or perhaps because of, this lack of clarity on the meaning of leadership, most people have a variety of strongly held ideas of people whom they think of as "leaders." Chart 1 shows the leaders most commonly named by students as "good or effective leaders."

While no single leader was chosen by even close to a majority of the students, it is remarkable that only 16 people garnered over 75% of the students' "votes." The person chosen most often by the students is their father, who received 11.6% of the votes. Mothers were also a common choice, but less so than their male counterparts (6.9%). In second place after fathers is King Norodom Sihanouk, the long-serving monarch of Cambodia who most students regard as a national hero; he received 10.9% of the votes. Third place went to Barack Obama, the US president who stepped down in 2017, with 8.1%.

Students gave a wide variety of reasons for their choices. A list of the most common reasons is shown in Annex 1 of this paper. The reasons are not shown in any particular order, nor is this data tabulated.

CHART 1: LEADERS CHOSEN BY STUDENTS
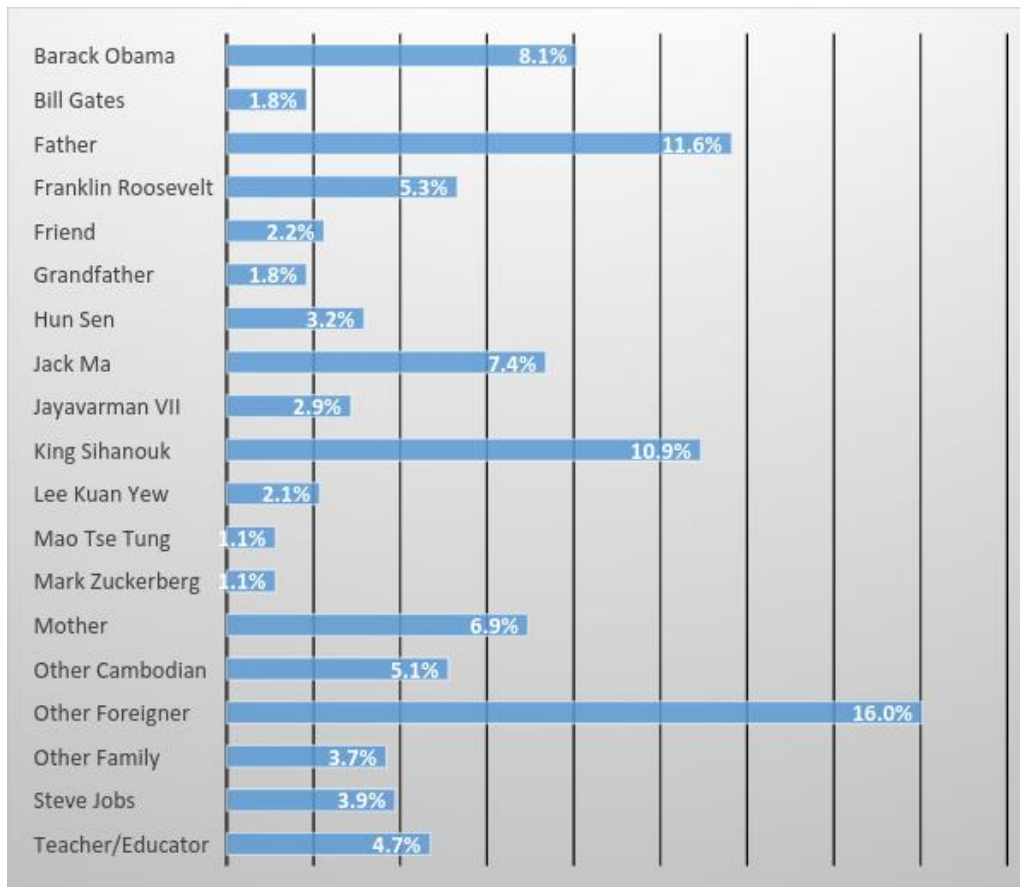
(N = 979)

In addition to the 16 leaders in Chart 1 that received a majority of the votes, there are three catch-all categories comprised of individuals who received the remaining 25% of the votes: Other Cambodian, Other Foreigner, and Other Family. Each individual in these categories received less than 1% of the total vote, so for the sake of clarity, these names do not appear on the chart above. There were literally dozens of other people that received votes, but the ones that received the most votes (though still under 1% each) are shown below, in alphabetical order, by category:

Other Cambodian

Kem Lay
Mengly Quach
Mong Rithy

Other Foreigner

Abraham Lincoln
Adolf Hitler
Ang San Suu Kyi
Beat Richner (head of Kantha Bopha Hospitals)
Buddha
Confucius

Gandhi
George Washington
Hillary Clinton
Ho Chi Minh
Michelle Obama
Nelson Mandela
Vladimir Putin
Xi Jinping
Yingluck Shinawatra

Other Family

Grandmother

Chart 2 shows the different fields or types of positions held by the leaders identified above:

CHART 2: LEADERS' FIELD OR TYPE OF POSITION
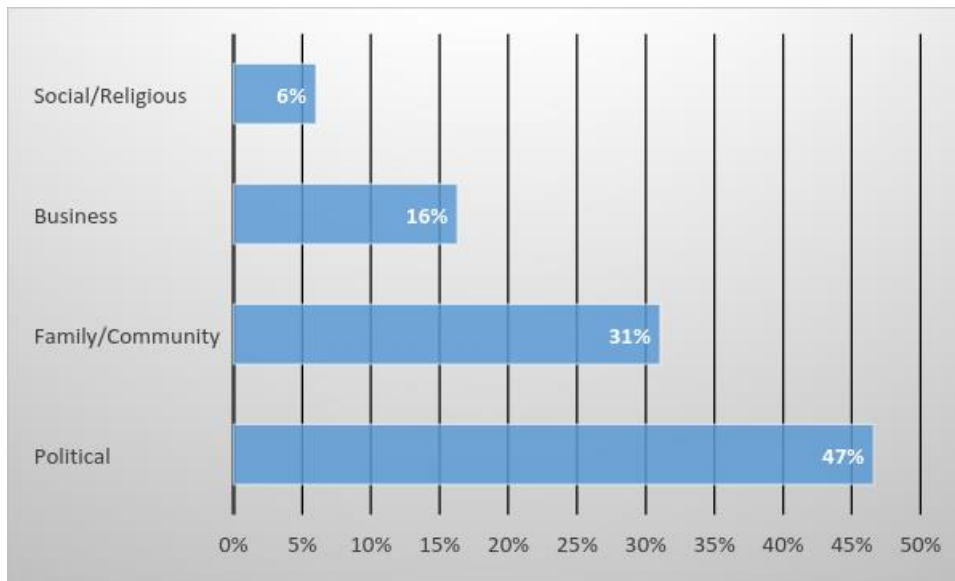
Leaders can be separated into four types or fields: political, business, family/community, and social/religious. The political leaders chosen by students were all government officials, mostly presidents, prime ministers, and kings. These officials represented almost half of the leaders chosen by students. Interestingly, American Presidents and First Ladies garnered more total votes (17%) than Cambodian political leaders (15%). Also, former President Barack Obama of the US was a much more popular choice (8.1%) than the current Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen (3.2%). On the other hand, Hun Sen's main rival in recent years, Sam Rainsy, received virtually no support, less than 1% of the vote.

Family or community leaders were the next most common choice after political leaders, with just under a third of the votes. In addition to fathers and mothers, the other family member most commonly identified as a leader were grandfathers. "Community leaders" means people who the students know well but who are not family, such as friends and teachers. High school and CamEd teachers were a common choice.

Business leaders, who received 16% of the votes, can be divided into two main categories: leaders of international technology or social media companies, such as Steve Jobs (Apple), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), Jack Ma (Alibaba), and Bill Gates (Microsoft); and Cambodian businessmen (and yes, they were all men) of all types, the only common theme being that they are wealthy and successful.

Finally, social and religious leaders were the least common choice of these four types of leaders, with only 6% of the votes. Leaders in this category include Buddha, Confucius, Gandhi, Beat Richner, and Kem Lay. Of course, the boundaries of all of these categories are fuzzy. Many leaders could be classified into more than one category, especially those identified as social or religious leaders.

Many other interesting points can be observed about the students' list of leaders. First, it is mostly male (85% of the votes). This is not true of the students themselves; in fact, a slight majority of the students are female. However, this bias for male leaders should not be

surprising. As has been well documented, in most countries there are few female leaders in certain fields such as politics and business. The reasons for this inequality lie outside the purview of this paper, but the fact is that there are few females portrayed as leaders in the national media, history books, social media, and other sources of information. Thus, there are few female role models for these students to look to. For example, as noted above, students commonly picked American presidents as leaders. However, there still has not been a female American president, so the only female political leaders that appear on this list are First Ladies and/or candidates (Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton).

The prevalence of female politicians and other types of leaders is even lower in Cambodia, where women are generally not encouraged to take official leadership positions. However, this may be changing. To take only one example: while there used to be a significant difference between girls and boys in school, the enrolment rates for both are now almost equal (in fact, the net enrolment rate for primary school is now actually higher for girls (96% vs. only 94% for boys); in secondary school, this drops to 37% for girls vs. 40% for boys, and at the tertiary level, the gross enrolment rate for girls is 12% vs. 14% for boys – so not quite equal, but close (World Bank, 2015)). Hopefully, then, this dearth of female leaders and public role models will be changing in the near future.

Another notable fact about the list of students' chosen leaders is that they are evenly split between Cambodians (50%) and foreign leaders (50%). While the political, business, and social leaders on this list tended to be foreign, a high number of votes also went to family members, who are almost all Cambodian, which evened out the total vote count between the two categories. The foreign leaders were spread out from all over the globe, though most were Asian (Jack Ma, Lee Kuan Yew) or American. American presidents, both current and historical, were especially popular. Indeed, for one term (2016 Term 2), Franklin Roosevelt received the most votes (13.2%) of any leader on the list. This may be due to the fact that the students had just finished taking courses on Political Science and the Cold War, in which Roosevelt was discussed prominently.

While Roosevelt is an exception, overall, the leaders chosen by students were much more likely to still be living (64%) than deceased (36%). This is likely due to the simple fact that most students are more familiar with current leaders than past ones, so they are more likely to choose them in this type of exercise. The big exception to this is King Sihanouk, who is deceased, yet lagged only fathers in the vote tally. However, he died only in 2012, so the students were very familiar with him, and he was a part of Cambodia's national scene for several decades. In fact, if there is one "national hero" of Cambodia, it would most certainly be him.

What are the Main Problems facing Cambodia?

In addition to identifying leaders, students also identified what they considered to be the most significant problems and issues facing communities in Cambodia. Chart 3 shows which issues were chosen most commonly by students as the topics for their group projects:

CHART 3: PROBLEMS ADDRESSED BY STUDENTS IN THEIR GROUP PROJECTS
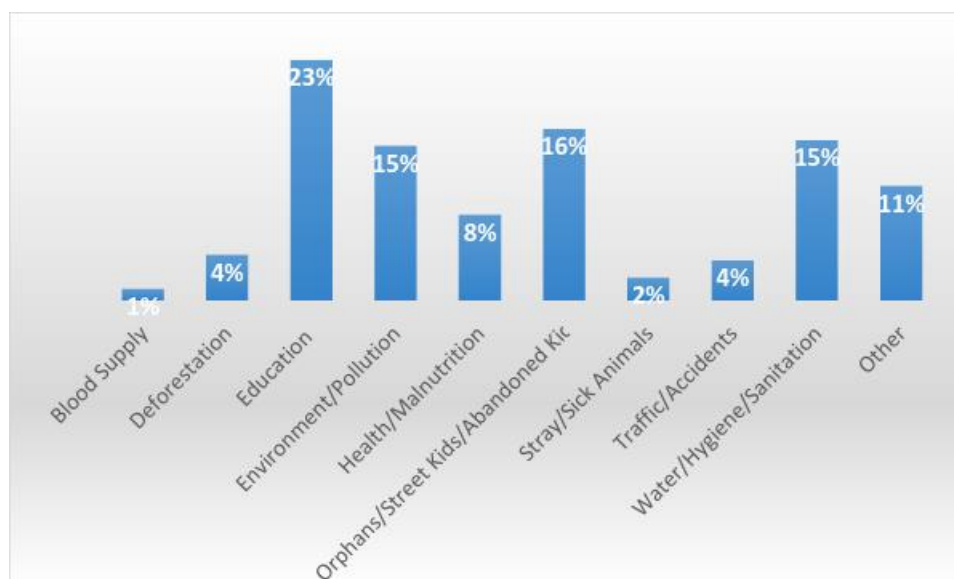

N = 183

Of the 183 projects completed by students over 3.5 years of classes, the most common project was related to education. Many students pointed out the lack of "human resources" in Cambodia, and they identified a plethora of problems in the education system: the poor quality of schools, especially in rural areas; the lack of facilities, especially secondary schools, also in rural areas; the lack of training and adequate salaries for teachers; the corruption in the system, which is related to the low pay, and takes such forms as teachers selling answers or giving preference to students that take their "private" classes; the lack of adequate supplies and resources in the classrooms; and the high drop-out rates for poor students.

The second most commonly chosen topic for group projects were those which dealt with poor children: orphans, abandoned kids, or street kids. The students often identified all of these kids as "orphans," though this is not correct. In fact, a majority of kids living in Cambodian "orphanages" are not orphans at all, but instead, kids handed over by their parents to the institution, usually because of poverty or other problems in the family (Sydney Morning Herald, 2015). The problems identified in these projects related not just to the circumstances of the kids' institutionalization, but the challenges they faced in getting a good education.

Other common themes include environmental issues such as littering, pollution, and deforestation (in fact, if these were added together, they would constitute the second most commonly chosen topic); access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene; and access to proper nutrition and health care.

For these group projects, students not only had to identify and study the problem, but also, to try to solve it. Therefore, the choices for their projects do not necessarily include those topics for which they felt they could have no significant impact on in the course of one term. However, some classes were also asked to simply identify which problems or issues they believed to be the most pressing in Cambodia, with no requirement that they had to try to solve these issues. Chart 4 shows their answers to this question:

CHART 4: CURRENT ISSUES IN CAMBODIA
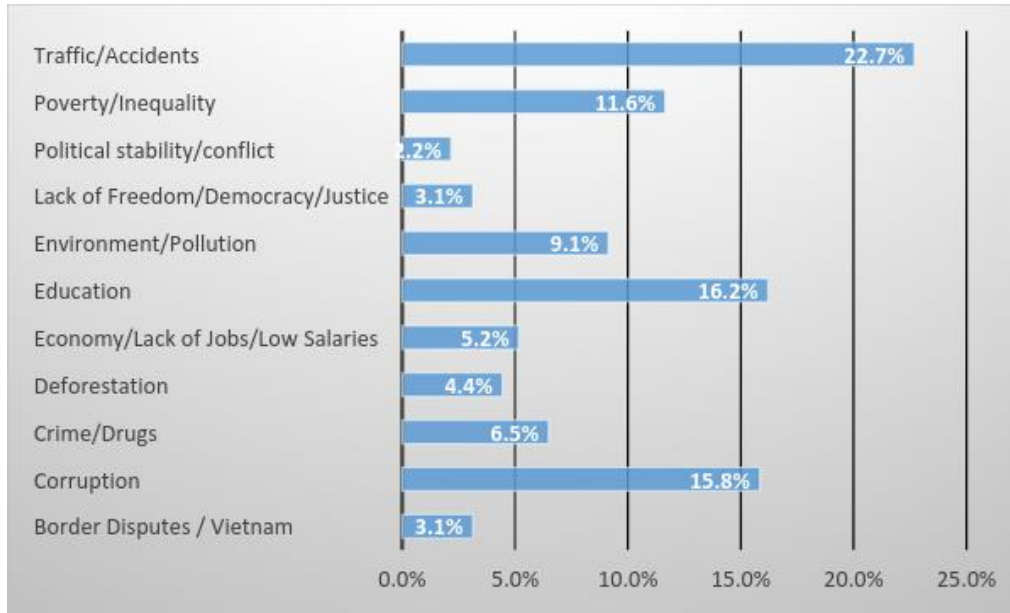
When identifying Cambodia's issues this way, the number one issue is traffic congestion and accidents. This includes the increasing amount of traffic on the roads; the frequent violation of traffic rules and the lack of enforcement of those rules; the increasing frequency of accidents; and the lack of consequences for people with money after an accident. As mentioned above, the data in this chart comes from classes in 2015 and 2016. Interestingly, traffic issues were only the third highest choice by students in 2015, but this topic shot up to first place by a wide margin in 2016. This may be related to the increasing frequency of traffic accidents, but the fact that traffic takes such a prominent place on this list of issues is also likely related to the fact that this set of students comes from relatively high-income families. Thus, most of them own cars, which means they are more directly affected by this problem than some of the other issues facing the "average" Cambodian, such as poverty or lack of nutrition.

However, many problems in the education system affect both rich and poor, and this topic is still the second most commonly cited issue in this survey. In third place is corruption. Interestingly, corruption was the most cited issue by the 2015 classes, but it fell to fourth place for the 2016 students, behind traffic, education, and crime and drugs. While this is not enough data to draw strong conclusions on trends, this does suggest the increasing importance of both traffic and crime/drugs in Cambodia.

The examples of corruption given by students are mostly related to politics, but they span all areas of life, including education. This shows, again, how many of these issues can overlap. Another example of this overlap is poverty, which received the fourth-most number of votes, and education. Though it may not affect them directly, many students pointed out how being poor in Cambodia almost always means getting an inadequate education and the many ways in which education system excludes the poor.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed and examined data gathered from first-year students at CamEd Business School about which people they regard as the most effective leaders and which issues they see as the most important ones facing Cambodia. The leaders most commonly identified include family members, especially their fathers; the late monarch, King Norodom Sihanouk; and American political leaders, notably Barack Obama. The issues most commonly identified by the students include improving the education system; enforcing traffic laws and decreasing congestion; giving more support to poor and abandoned children; cleaning up and protecting the environment; and reducing corruption.

While it is difficult to draw conclusive lessons from this data, it does suggest that most students do not see the country's current political leaders as the most effective role models. On the other hand, the data reflects the close connections and strong bonds in many Cambodian families. It also indicates that Cambodian youth look to America for leadership models more than to any other foreign country.

Furthermore, the data suggests that students have a clear understanding that for Cambodia to continue to develop its economy and improve living conditions for its people, it needs leaders who will prioritize education, especially in rural areas (which encompasses almost 80% of the population) and for the most vulnerable families (street kids, orphans, etc.). Leaders will also need to improve the roads and infrastructure of the country, which seems to be a growing issue, while keeping a lid on the pollution and garbage that is increasingly affecting the environment. Finally, leaders need to clamp down on the corruption that affects all levels of government and society.

Students in the 2017 class were asked one additional question pertinent to the issues raised in this paper: do they see themselves as a potential future leader? A full 84% of the students responded "yes" – a good sign for the future of their country.

REFERENCE LIST

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Sydney Morning Herald. December 18, 2015. "Cambodia: too many orphanages, not enough orphans." Retrieved from: http://www.smh.com.au/world/head-20151126-gl8n5a.html

ANNEX: WHAT MAKES A GOOD LEADER?

Below are the most common reasons given by students for choosing the person they identified as good leaders. The reasons are shown in no particular order, nor has it been tabulated.

- Started life poor but is now rich
- Is popular and well-liked
- Helps poor and disadvantaged people
- Runs a successful business
- Intelligent
- Helps their country develop or become stronger
- Helps people unify or come together into a strong group
- Handles a lot of tasks at once
- Does not give up, persistent
- Believes he/she can succeed, confident
- Willing to fight and even die for the good of other people or his/her country
- Is respected by people
- Takes care of his/her family
- Gives good advice; wise
- Helps bring peace when there is trouble or fighting
- Inspires other people to stand up for their rights
- Successfully despite being "different" (not the same race, nationality, gender, etc. as most people)
- Is rich and/or powerful
- Is a good teacher of others
- Always willing to help other people
- Good at solving problems
- Shows respect to everyone; kind
- Honest, trustworthy
- Is not a dictator or greedy for power or glory
- Does not discriminate
- Works hard
- Responsible; when he/she says they will do something, they do it
- Puts together a good team
- Shares his/her knowledge or wisdom
- Good at handling a crisis
- Creative, comes up with good ideas
- Motivates other people to work hard
- Not afraid to speak out against injustice
- Good public speaker
- Wins battles or wars
- Has thousands or millions of employees/followers
- Adaptable; flexible
- Stays calm when others get scared or upset
- Empowers his followers
- Has a clear vision or goal
- Inspires others with his/her vision
- Listens to ideas of others
- Empathetic; tries to understand the feelings of others