When Franks and Richmond stated that peace in Cambodia was ‘virtual’, they put the finger on an elusive but crucial point in the process of re-building Cambodia (2007; cf. Roberts 2011), furthering previous critical perspectives on shallow democratization (Heder 2005; McCarthy 2005), and claims to weak governance and remaining patronage culture (Roberts 2004; Hughes 2006; Un 2004; Öjendal & Lilja 2009). They highlight that in spite of success in terms of political stability, economic growth, and the upholding of constitutional democracy (Sivhuoch et al. 2012), and in spite of that the UN consider it one of its major successes (UN 1995), the foundations for ‘positive peace’ may neither be as deep as those crude macro indicators indicate, nor as sustainable as one may assume. Hence, in spite of 20 years of intensive peacebuilding – often assuming the features of statebuilding – there are several deficits for achieving sustainable peace. This article takes its point of departure in this reasoning, and as such it treads along the following phases. Firstly it observes that the introduction of a liberal order under an international (mildly coercive) intervention led by the UN and later complemented by the international donor community, was among the most massive, sudden, and crude we have seen in the post-cold war world. Hence friction(s) between the international and the local can be expected, as well as trade-offs between the long- and the short-term. Secondly, we make an inventory of which the key deficits in this liberal transformation have turned out to be, and which quality these assume in the short- and long term. Thirdly, we observe the rather progressive attempts at ‘localising peacebuilding’ through the establishment of democratic local government, which is at the core of an emerging public sector reform, widely believed to have the potential to take Cambodia beyond shallow and internationally induced reforms. Fourthly, based on the above, we aim to illuminate how liberal reforms are selectively integrated and grounded, occasionally producing solid and sustainable change, while at large a hybrid system is created which incorporates critical features of the liberal paradigm without necessarily delivering what the proponents of that paradigm may have assumed.