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Social Media's Growing Influence on Cambodian Politics

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Sophat Soeung, Research Fellow with the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, explains that “Irrespective of the upcoming election results, social media has created a nascent and more pluralistic online political environment where Cambodians exchange different political viewpoints freely.”

One month before Cambodia's general election scheduled for July 28, the government announced a directive banning local radio stations from airing foreign programs during the campaign and election period. The directive temporarily banned programs from Western broadcasters including Voice of America and Radio Free Asia's Khmer-language services. In response, the Cambodian public immediately turned to Facebook and other social media voicing their condemnation, followed by the US government and international media outlets, resulting in the government reversing the ban the next day. Both social media and the Internet are increasingly changing the dynamics of election politics worldwide, especially in countries with a high youth-bulge, and Cambodia is no exception to this trend.

Observers widely agree that the ruling Cambodia People's Party (CPP) will win the election, returning incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen to power, a position he has held since 1985. As in its 2008 landslide victory, the CPP continues to maintain strong rural support, while presiding over rapid economic growth and maintaining a tight grip on the country's media. However, social changes—including social media—over the past five years, along with political changes, will likely ensure that the CPP is short of its earlier landslide win.

An example of political change is that the two main opposition parties merged into one party, the new Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) under the leadership of Sam Rainsy, who has now returned from self-imposed exile in France to join his deputy, Kem Sokha, also a seasoned politician, for last-minute campaigning. In addition, the CPP is less able to use nationalism to attract the votes of the “post-Khmer Rouge baby-boomers”—those born after 1979—who are 36 percent of registered voters. It is this demographic that presents the single greatest opportunity for the opposition, a cohort that uses the Internet and social media rather than state-controlled media as an important source of news.

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Social media, especially Facebook, is a recent phenomenon in Cambodia and to date has not been subject to governmental controls. Government figures show that from 2010 to 2012, Internet penetration in Cambodia jumped from one percent to nearly 20 percent, partly due to the proliferation of mobile devices. Facebook has emerged as the most popular platform and has registered over 900,000 users, including social-media savvy members of the opposition. Even before opposition politicians began utilizing social media tools, civil society and human rights groups were already using them amidst Cambodia's otherwise highly restricted media climate. Activists opposing Phnom Penh's controversial Boeung Kak lake development project, in particular, utilize social media to gain public attention in a city with high Internet penetration.



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Videos of their protests have gained a lot of traction in local and foreign media and won them international recognition. Facebook has evolved from primarily an entertainment website to an alternative news source and platform for self-expression, and a way to bypass the state-controlled one-sided views on radio and television.

A small—and possibly staged—pro-government protest at the Cambodian Mekong University in May could be a watershed in Cambodian politics. This was an incident where protesters criticized visiting UN Human Rights envoy Surya Subedi regarding his negative report on human rights violations in Cambodia. Just two months before the election, the protest attracted an unprecedented youth reaction online—an “anti-protest” to the protesters. For the first time many young Cambodians showed interest in a political issue and freely expressed their views. Some uploaded personal videos criticizing the protest against Subedi that they considered unrepresentative of their views. One day after the online “anti-protest” reaction, Cambodia’s National Election Committee (NEC) issued an appeal for social media users to refrain from spreading misinformation.

The NEC’s call for public caution could help expand the impact of social media in Cambodian politics, a trend that some claim is already irreversible. CNRP opposition leader Sam Rainsy and others started their online election campaign to attract young voters well ahead of official campaign season. By June, Rainsy had claimed “victory” over Hun Sen for Facebook popularity. Not long after that declaration, Hun Sen’s Facebook page began posting more regular updates, often responding directly to issues raised by the opposition. Needless to say, the online campaign has allowed the opposition to bring up issues of interest to young voters—human rights, social justice, corruption, education, and unemployment. Online at least, the election process seems free and fair.

The impact of social media for now, however, is extremely limited in rural areas—the traditional electoral base of the CPP. Rural Cambodians primarily rely on state-controlled radio and television for news and information. Perhaps for this reason, the Internet in Cambodia has remained uncensored, which some proudly call “digital democracy.” On the same day as the NEC statement, Cambodian Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith said his government does not plan to shut down Facebook, but warned that “improper” content might be met with lawsuits. Over time, as the Internet expands into rural areas, social media will likely become more vulnerable to government censorship, especially under a CPP administration.

Irrespective of the upcoming election results, social media has created a nascent and more pluralistic online political environment where Cambodians exchange different political viewpoints freely. These are significant emerging trends that will impact youth political behavior beyond the July elections. Cambodia is following other Southeast Asian states in this trend, most recently witnessed in Malaysia’s closely fought May election.

Looking ahead, the international community, ASEAN democracies, and the US government should further invest in Cambodia’s emerging digital democracy and ensure that the Internet remains free. The US Embassy in Phnom Penh is to be commended for its many pioneering projects with youth and civil society—from blogging, to technology conferences and communications innovation. These initiatives have, however, done little to open up state-controlled traditional media to other political groups—something that the international community should continue advocating for. As freedom of expression continues to shrink off-line in Cambodia, it looks as if the role of digital democracy via social media will only increase in this election process. Furthermore, for Cambodia’s increasingly outspoken younger generation, online democracy may well hold the promise of off-line change beyond July’s election.

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