

Internet, Facebook, competing political narratives, and political control in Cambodia

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Introduction

The Internet and social media are thought to be a democratising tool, especially in contexts where democratic participation is limited due either to political apathy from the citizens or to authoritarian control. Social media, in particular, allow people to access information not available in mainstream media, connect with like-minded people, mobilise resources and communicate directly with politicians. This paper complements existing understanding by looking at how political contest and control play out in the Cambodian social media landscape by focusing on Facebook pages of Cambodia's ruling party leader and opposition party leader.

Early literature on the Internet and information and communication technologies has often set a positive tone on the prospect of the emerging "affordances" for new possibilities of civic and political engagement despite several cautions, and the idea that new technologies strengthen democracy remains common (Storsul, 2014). In both the global North and South, this new digital media has been proven as a democratising tool and space (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Yang, 2009; Nisbet et al., 2012). The Internet and social media have also been seen as enabling what used to be known as "politically apathetic" youth to engage with politics in new ways (Dahlgren, 2007; Loader, 2007; Livingstone, 2009), and a lot of effort has been made to present social media as an enabler of Arab Spring and other political protests (Kyi, 2006; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Herrera & Mayo, 2012; Browning, 2013; Maamari & Zein, 2014).

There is, however, less understanding of how social media and politics interact in a stable authoritarian context (Pearce, 2014). Also, the Internet and social media also present a new arena of political control and persecution in such a context (Pearce, 2014). This paper contributes to this understanding by looking at how political contest and control play out in the Cambodian social media and political landscape. Instead of looking at how citizens utilise social media, the paper focuses on how two political elites bring their contest onto Facebook and attempt to offer two competing narratives of Cambodia, aiming to legitimise their political and personal legitimacy for power. It also relates this new contest to the familiar history of information control and suppression by the Cambodian ruling regimes since the mid-20th century.

The Internet has gained centrality in politics and beyond in the past two decades (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2007; Sarikakis & Thussu, 2006). Interests in the effect of communication technologies, from newspapers to radio and television, on the political process have been long-standing in political communication research (Oates, 2008), and the Internet and social media have become the latest technologies that raise questions about the nature of politics, political participation and democracy. They have been seen, among others, as space and tool for information, organising and mobilising, and reaching out to politicians. This has raised optimism among researchers and observers across political regimes, hoping that political elites are to be held more accountable (for example, Bosch, 2013; Browning, 2013; Mutsvairo & Sirks, 2015; Dumitrica, 2014; Bode, 2017; Chou & Fu, 2017; Placek, 2017; Vong & Hok, 2018), despite reservations about the realisation of the democratic potential of the Internet and social media, including harsh political control; digital surveillance; digital inequality; and, traditional usage (Ward et al., 2003; Castells & Sey, 2004; Pearce, 2014; Calderaro, 2017; Young, forthcoming B; Zuboff, 2019).

Given the potential of the Internet and social media, many politicians have been quick to embrace them for their political advantage. How Obama utilised them in the 2008 and 2012 United States elections to engage with young American voters has by now become a typical case story (White & Anderson, 2017). In Turkey, Turkish political parties and leaders made heavy use of Facebook to present information and discourse supporting their cause during the 2011 general election (Bayraktutan et al., 2014). In Germany, social media, especially Facebook, has been used by politicians to engage with their constituents beyond the electoral process (Oelsner & Heimrich, 2015). In the Middle East, media and Facebook become a significant weapon for regime change, including Arab Spring (Storck, 2011).

Cambodian politicians and government have realised the potential of Facebook for realising their political goals, especially given the youthful Cambodian population and the close affinity between social media and young people. In this contribution, we attempt to examine how two key political figures, Cambodia's "strong man" Prime Minister Hun Sen and most popular opposition leader Sam Rainsy, utilise Facebook to engage with Cambodian people and present their political narratives. In the following, we will first describe the Cambodian context of political communication as a repressive controlling regime. We will then show how political contestation and control have transformed with Facebook before illustrating the two political leaders' usage of Facebook. The contribution will conclude with a remark on the prospect of political control of and censorship through social media, especially Facebook, in Cambodia.

Censoring Cambodia: Media in Cambodian political history

Media was central to Cambodia's political development after independence in the mid-twentieth century. During the French protectorate, French and Vietnamese language newspapers dominated Cambodian press. The first Khmer language newspaper *Nagaravatta*, or "the Land of Pagodas," only started in 1936 and from the start was a political tool for Cambodian nationalists (see Chandler, 2000; Clarke, 2000). Towards the end of the colonial rule, several other publications began circulation and took on the French colonial master in the attempt to gain independence. While some describe these publications as political tools (see Mehta, 1997; Clarke, 2000), they play a part in promoting nationalism and contributing the construction of Cambodia as an "imagined" national community (see Edwards, 2007; Ngoun, 2011; Young, forthcoming B). It is in this context that Cambodia's post-independent ruling regimes have consistently controlled the media to suppress opposition and monopolise political narratives.

Before rampant civil wars and the contestation over power in the 1970s, Cambodia was once known as a prosperous country in Southeast Asia. Led by Prince Sihanouk, Prime Minister after abdicating in favour of his father Norodom Suramarit, the country was well developed in various sectors. Known as a regime of *Reastr Niyum*, or "People's Socialist Community," memories of modern sports, education, infrastructure, agriculture and industrial development were recorded and documented in Norodom Sihanouk's personal website <http://norodomsihanouk.info>, which remains to date maintained by the Royal Palace (Young, forthcoming B). The purpose of photographic and video events of Norodom Sihanouk, who deceased in 2012 in Beijing, eight years after his son Norodom Sihamoni was crowned, was to preserve his legacies and legitimate power (Wolfarth, 2014). These carefully constructed messages have impressed the younger generation with the "modernity" and development during his regime, leading to a comparison with the present (Young, forthcoming B).

However, the glory of Prince Sihanouk was not unproblematic. Under his rule from 1953 to 1970, there were about 30 newspapers published in Phnom Penh (Strangio, 2016). These media outlets, though flourishing at that time, were controlled by his regime. The Prince hauled those critical editors or journalists and incarcerated them, and banned foreign media and journalists. Self-censorship, harassment by the security forces, and violence, including a case of daylight assassination in the capital in 1959, were common. He also produced, directed and acted in several films (Wolfarth, 2014) to construct himself to the citizens as one of the heroic leaders after the Angkor era. These projected images and narrative captured the imagination of the rural, mostly uneducated, population but were not well received many in the middle class (Shawcross, 2002). Broadcast media were exclusively owned by the Prince's government (Clarke, 2000).

The Prince also published a number of newspapers and magazines to propagate his national programs, fight oppositions and build a royal image (Mehta, 1997). Among these publications, monthly magazine *Kambuja Monthly Illustrated Review*, began in 1965, was an important political tool. While his state-controlled radio and TV aim to control and maintain his legitimacy within the country, *Kambuja* was a critical outlet for the Prince to express his political stance internationally, trying to distance Cambodia from the Vietnam War (Chandler, 2000).

Immediately after seizing power through a coup in 1970, Lon Nol imposed martial law, effectively censoring all media outlets. The later years of the Lon Nol regime between 1970 and 1975 saw tight controlling of the media as well as persecution and violence against journalists and political critics. Several arrests of reporters and critics were made, a number of

publications were closed, an editor's car was bombed, and mob attacks on press offices were organised by the state bombing of an editor's car, resulting in high levels of self-censorship (Mehta, 1997). State-owned media were used to criticise and condemn Lon Nol's predecessor, Prince Sihanouk, and to legitimise the regime as a democratic one, with the support of the United States.

The Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979 was a notorious failure in social experimentation. It is a utopian project to transform Cambodia into an ultra-socialist society, and the regime attempted to get rid of what it perceived to be elements of capitalism and Western imperialism (Young, forthcoming B). The middle class and educated were particularly targeted, and journalists were among them, resulting in many being executed or fleeing the country (Clarke, 2000). The Khmer Rouge monopolised the access to information, providing to the population only revolutionary imaginations and propaganda materials through the state-owned radio station, news pamphlets and magazines (Tyner et al., 2015; Young, forthcoming B). Radio broadcasts were generally speeches of revolutionary leaders and songs (Mehta, 1997).

The pro-Soviet regime People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), which toppled the Khmer Rouge and ran the country in the 1980s, maintained tight control over the media. Forbidding private media outlets, the PRK ran a state news agency, a radio station, a TV station and a bunch of print publications. At the same time, territories controlled by other political factions had their radio outlets. In this context, the PRK media were focused on announcing state information and programs, propagating its revolutionary imaginations and capturing people's allegiance towards the regime (Mehta, 1997; Clarke, 2000), turning Cambodia into a self-censoring society.

When a peace agreement was reached in Paris in 1991 to resolve “the Cambodia problem,” an internationally supported democratisation process was begun to “reconstruct” Cambodia and reintegrate the country into the new world order of democracy and capitalism (Young, 2016). The Cambodian press was set to benefit from this process with the mushrooming of the media and aid industry. By 1998, the number of registered newspapers was 80, although about half of them never published regularly. By 2005, there were 266 registered newspapers, 13 registered media associations, 58 magazines, 58 radio channels, seven TV channels and two cable TV providers (Peou, 2009).

The democratic promise was, however, not straightforward. Throughout the 1990s, persecution and violence against journalists were commonplace given the lack of law enforcement, corruption and political instability. Between 1994 and 1997, at least six journalists were killed, and several others receiving jail and death threats (Lor, 2002). Going into the turn of the century, persecution remained with reported cases of lawsuits against and arrests of journalists climbing from nine in 2002 to 13 and 19 in 2003 and 2004, respectively (Loo, 2006). The Law on the Press Regime, passed in 1995, was often used to restrict and prosecute the freedom of speech. Broadcast media generally practised self-censorship or were affiliated with the ruling party, especially after 1998, focusing mainly on administrative activities of state officials and entertainment content (Peou, 2009).

To date, the Cambodian media landscape remains restricted by its political environment (Peou et al., 2013). Persecution and violence against critical media and figures remain, and self-censorship a norm (LICADHO, 2008; 2009). It is, in this context, the Internet and social media offer hope for a democratic space for information and political engagement. However, in recent

years, the hype of the new media as a democratising tool has cooled down as persecution and harassment of critics were carried over by the ruling regime onto the new media scene (see CCHR, 2012; Schröder & Young, 2019). The question remains, whether tried and tested methods of political control over traditional media will be effective over social media.

Changing political and media scene

A multi-party governance system returned to Cambodia in 1993 but has since regressed as the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and its strong man Hun Sen has consolidated power in the past 25 years. In 1993, the CPP won only 51 seats in the parliament compared to 58 seats by its rival royalist party, but in 1998, 2003 and 2013 elections, the CPP comfortably dominated the parliamentary seats. When most predicting the CPP to win the 2013 national election easily, the newly consolidated opposition party Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) surprised most observers by significantly reducing the CPP's seats in the parliament. Led by its exiled leader Sam Rainsy, the CNRP managed to win 55 seats compared to CPP's 68 seats even with accusations of vote-rigging by the ruling CPP. The total popular votes the CNRP received was 2.9 million compared to 3.2 million of the CPP. The strong outing by the opposition during the 2013 election and the violent suppression after the ruling CPP against political protests after the election signalled a change in Cambodia's political direction, and many believe social media have a part to play.

Access to information through the Internet and social media has been an essential factor behind the increased support for the CNRP. There are now 11 television channels and dozens of radio channels, but they are mostly controlled by or affiliated with the ruling party (Reporters

Without Border, 2020). They often propagate the CPP's political agendas, the way the previous ruling regimes practised. They also focused on "peace" achievement "modern" developments, especially infrastructure projects, under the CPP's and Hun Sen's rule. During the 2013 election campaign, election monitors and watchdogs found that the ruling party controlled the media outlets, leaving few hours available for the opposition parties (COMFREL, 2013). The CNRP could only have limited access to the state TV channel TVK and state radio channels organised by the National Election Committee. The opposition often had to rely on English language newspaper and international broadcasters for a share of air time and communicating its agenda to the people, especially Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Radio France Internationale (RFI), who were in turn accused by the ruling CPP of interfering with Cambodia's internal affairs and instigating political and social instability.

This restricted media space has countered by social media to provide critical information to the population by the opposition and government critics. The number of Internet subscriptions in Cambodia rose from under 30,000 in 2009 to nearly 200,000 in 2010. By 2020, Internet penetration has jumped to over 47.9% per cent compared to 39% in 2015, mostly via smartphones, and Facebook had become the second most important information source – 67.1% per cent (11.35 million) of the population (about 16.7 million in 2020) – after TV and over the radio (Internet World Statistics, 2020; NapoleonCat, 2020). The rapid increase in the rate of internet and social media penetration in the country can open a new platform for exchange and communication, in which anyone with a smartphone can create news and even become a citizen journalist (Young, forthcoming B). This digital era can be a double-edged sword: positive and negative effects for the users, but the former is more likely perceived by the Cambodians given how excited they are to have used or accessed to new technologies; how materialised and modernised after a rampant conflict (Young, forthcoming B).

The social media, especially Facebook, has provided a new space and tool to access information and enable communication previously restricted by tightly controlled or self-censoring traditional media. For example, just less than two weeks before the national election in 2013, the opposition party CNRP leader Sam Rainsy returned to Cambodia after a political agreement was reached to give him a royal pardon for his politically motivated jail charge. By this time, the CNRP had already been using Facebook to disseminate information and gather support, and news of the imminent return of its leader became widespread on Facebook. The day of his return saw one of the biggest crowds in recent Cambodian history gathering and lining up the street to welcome him or witness the moment. Local broadcast TV and radio channels either ignored the event or made light of it. Still, such a critical political event was accessible to anyone with a Facebook account as it was reported and shared by CNRP supporters within and beyond Cambodia.

Many observers also add the increased number of below-30-year-old voters a critical factor behind the increased support for the CNRP despite recent reservations about such assumption. Two-thirds of the population is 30 years old or younger are now on social media, having 30.8% (18-24 years old) and 45.8% (25-34 years old) on Facebook (NapoleonCat, 2020). Furthermore, these adults were born after the Khmer Rouge regime, the ending of which was largely credited to the CPP. As the argument goes, this younger generation has no direct experience of the Khmer Rouge atrocities and hence does not relate to the ruling CPP's repeated claim for gratitude from the population for ending the Khmer Rouge. Over 30 per cent of the registered voters, 2.62 out of 7.86 million, in the 2013 election was between the age of 18 and 30, and 1.5 million were first-time voters, according to the National Election Committee website.

It is generally taken for granted that this youth generation has turned away from the ruling CPP, and the CNRP has taken advantage of the demographic change to mobilise young voters' support through social media by providing them with alternative information from traditional media and engaging them with their political promises. However, two leaked recent surveys in 2015 and 2016 by an Israel-based consulting group hired by the ruling CPP show that the ruling party and its leader Hun Sen receive more support from the 18-to-29 age group than the opposition. Instead, it is the 30-to-39 age group that holds more support for the opposition CNRP and its leader Sam Rainsy.

Hun Sen versus Sam Rainsy — Facebook contest and completing political narratives

By early 2017, the number of active social media users in Cambodia was estimated between 4.3 and 5.2 million, between 18 and 34 per cent of the population (NapoleonCat, 2020), most of which were on Chinese and affordable smartphones, some of which cost just about 25\$ (Young, forthcoming B). Given the reach of Facebook and the potential of engaging people politically by feeding political information into people's newsfeed and connecting with people directly, Cambodian politicians have in recent years focused on utilising Facebook for political gain. In early 2016, Hun Sen ordered all government ministries and bodies to set up Facebook pages to better connect with the people. Ministerial Facebook working groups have since been set up, senior governmental officials had their own Facebook page created – though mostly in a public relations show-off manner, and many civil servants ordered to like, follow and comment on ministerial Facebook pages and Facebook pages of their bosses.

The two most important current political figures, Prime Minister Hun Sen and opposition leader Sam Rainsy, have been among the most active in using Facebook as a means to engage with their political subjects. Currently, Hun Sen's official Facebook page has about 13.22 million likes and Sam Rainsy's Page over 4.88 million likes. For Hun Sen, Facebook popularity has even become personal. Having overtaken Sam Rainsy in Facebook likes and becoming the second most "engaging" leader on Facebook in the world the last year (McCaffrie, 2016), Hun Sen boasted himself as the "father of Facebook" while earlier mocked Sam Rainsy as the "Facebook Prime Minister."

Hun Sen

Cambodia began its economic recovery and integration in the early 1990s, and from 2004 to 2007 it experienced double-digit economic growth of about 10 per cent. With this significant growth, poverty has, according to the World Bank, declined from 53 per cent in 2004 to 38 per cent in 2008 and further to 20 per cent in 2011 (Yonzan et al., 2020). These achievements, including peace, economic development and development in all sectors, are claimed for credit by the ruling CPP. These are often cited as incomparable legacies of leader Hun Sen. Through different media, including newspapers, TV and more recently Facebook, images of such achievements of his regime are circulated online and offline to propagate the ruling party's political narrative.

Hun Sen began using Facebook in 2014 by taking over a page called *Samdech Hun Sen Cambodian Prime Minister*, which he claimed to be managed once managed by a group of students who supported him. In 2020, his Page was ranked the most popular one in Cambodia

with 13.22 million likes and fans (increased from 8.2 million in 2017), overtaking popular pages such as Voice of America (7.36 million), Radio Free Asia Khmer (6.86 million), Post Khmer (6.13 million), Khmerload (5.82 million), Sabay News (5.45 million), Meas Soksopeha (4.95 million), and Sam Rainsy (4.88 million) rising slowly from 4.1 million in 2017¹, while there are 11.35 million Facebook users as in October 2020 (Socialbakers, 2020).

In 2014, Hun Sen instructed all his officials and party members to share and follow his posts and photographs on the Facebook page. The aim is to direct officials and government institutions to monitor and respond to complaints that people communicate to him. He also once announced that any disgruntled individual could directly chat to his inbox if they had any complaints. Some cases have been reported to be solved quickly after their Facebook message to him (Vong & Hok, 2018). At the same time, he often threatened those users and followers who posted comments critical of him on his Facebook page.

On his Facebook page, the Prime Minister posted comments and pictures and lived broadcasts his official activities, and sometimes personal ones, aiming to connect himself closer to the imaginations of the Cambodian population along with the political narrative of developments and modernity – an approach used by the leaders of the previous regimes on TV. Per week, he posted videos (80%), photos (12%) and text status (8%) to draw admiring comments and well-wishing from his supporters although sometimes also comments critical of lower-level officials or governance. Videos and photos attract his fans the most, with about 5.11 fan and 4.2 fan engagement per 1,000 fans, respectively. This means at least between 55,543 to 67,577 fans interact (views, shares and comments) with videos, and photos he posted per week². To

¹ According to <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/cambodia> (accessed in April 2017 and November 2020).

² According to <https://suite.socialbakers.com/943568/dashboard/1726732> (Access November 2020)

combine these visual posts, only 0.93% of the total fan (13.22 million) engages with his video and photo posts per week, and in overall, about 4.5% (600,000 fans) the total fan engagement with the Page per week (Socialbacker, 2020). To compare the total fan, the level of engagement is relatively low. While Hun Sen infrequently acts on comments asking for his help, in this sense allowing the people to communicate to him directly, his usage pattern is largely about the glorification of himself and his party's rule as well as personally and verbally attacking his opposition.

Sam Rainsy

While living in exile to avoid a politically charged jail sentence, Sam Rainsy began using Facebook as a means to communicate with his supporters before returning to Cambodia in July 2013, and escaped against in 2014. His Facebook page *Sam Rainsy* had 4.1 million likes and followers in 2017, and has slowly increased to just 4.88 million in November 2020. He has long been active on his Facebook page, posting, and comments, news summaries, pictures and video clips about social issues focusing on social injustice and corruption. Compared to Hun Sen, Sam Rainsy makes fewer Facebook posts but draw more engagement from his supporters. On average, he has about 92,840 interactions with his Facebook page per week, of which per 1,000 fans he has about 2.63 fans, and 1.61 fans engage with his video and photo posts, respectively. Like Hun Sen, video and photo posts attract interaction of his fans the most. To combine video and photo post, 0.26% and 0.16% of total fan interact with video and photo posts per week, respectively. In overall, only 1.89% of total fan interact with his Facebook page per week (Socialbaker, 2020). Compared to Hun Sen page, the level of interaction of fan with the Sam Rainsy' Facebook page is proportionally lower than Hun San's Facebook page.

In stark contrast with Hun Sen's posts, Sam Rainsy's posts are generally about instances of social injustice, crimes, corruption, violence and abuse by authorities, Vietnamese migration into Cambodia, territorial loss, and citizen protests. Unlike Hun Sen, who tried to construct a political narrative of national prosperity based on a dark past of the Khmer Rouge regime and for which he is a glorified leader, Sam Rainsy focuses on constructing a political narrative of a poorly run and highly exploited country with self-serving leaders and officials where the national identity and existence is at stake.

As Hun Sen began to use Facebook in 2014, the competition over online popularity between the two political figures ensued. While Sam Rainsy could once claim he had more support from Cambodians based on his Facebook popularity, Hun Sen later managed to beat Sam Rainsy on the number of Facebook likes and followers and mocked Sam Rainsy as a "loser." In return, Sam Rainsy, likely rightly so, alleged that Hun Sen buy likes from outside Cambodia and order the setup of a technical Facebook working group to create fake accounts to increase the number of likes on his Page.

Such allegation was, in turn, retaliated by Hun Sen with a defamation charge (Niem & Turton, 2016). Following the allegation, Hun Sen assigned a government and party official to oversee fake accounts and mobilise more genuine follower accounts, and to file a defamation complaint against Sam Rainsy, who was in 2016 ordered by the court to pay USD2,500 to the state and USD3,750 in compensation to Hun Sen (Touch, 2017). In addition, the fact that a large number of his followers are from outside Cambodia is claimed by Hun Sen to show that is well respected in the region and the world.

Fig. 01: Hun Sen’s distribution of fan population

Source: www.socialbakers.com, as of 6 June 2017³

Fig. 02: Sam Rainsy’s distribution of fan population

Source: www.socialbakers.com, as of 6 June 2017

In 2017, of the total fan of Hun Sen’s Facebook page, only 45.6% was from Cambodia. The rest come from the Philippines (12.8%), India (10.6%), Indonesia (7.1%), Vietnam (6.1%) and others (17.8). Sam Rainsy’s Facebook page, however, boasts a larger proportion of Cambodians within his fan base (77.7%), approximately 3.15 million and still fewer than that of Hun Sen’s (see Figures 1 and 2 above). Notably, 6.6% of Sam Rainsy’s Facebook fans come from Thailand, the largest destination for Cambodian labour migrants. As the total fan of Hun Sen’s Facebook page nearly doubled as of November 2020, this has been proudly claimed how charismatic leader he has been.

Conclusion — prospect for democracy and control

The Internet and social media are thought to open a new space for democratic engagement, given the limited role of mainstream media in promoting meaningful political engagement in

³ We use 2017 data to present the proportion of fans from different countries as it was the time that the two leaders were contesting over the legitimate followers on Facebook. The 2020 data is not publicly accessed by researchers on www.socialbakers.com

contexts of little democratic practice (Placek, 2017). It allows people to access information not accessible in the mainstream media, share information and mobilise resources to organise. In the context Cambodia, where the ruling party and self-censorship tightly control mainstream media is the norm, Facebook provides a space for the opposition leader to compete directly with the ruling party leader in engaging with Cambodians and in constructing and demonstrating a competing political narrative of Cambodia, hoping to rally support and bring about a historic political change in the country's recent history.

The two major parties or leaders have envisioned social media as a critical space for their political project. They have imagined, as to what Anderson (2006) suggests in print media: the larger space they expanded (through the expansion of their community members) the higher probability of political actualisation. That social media space is imagined to have implication for political reality. The results of the commune election 2017 help justify the opposition leader's imagination in social media as his party managed to win in 484 out of 1,632 communes, a twelve-fold increase from 2012. The opposition CNRP managed to get 44% of the popular votes, compared that 51% by the ruling CPP. Despite claiming higher popularity on Facebook, Hun Sen saw his party's support significantly reduced in both the national election in 2013 and commune election in 2017. Notwithstanding these results, Hun Sen remains defiant on Facebook arguing that the number of ballots voted in favour of his party increased from 3.2 million in 2013 to 3.5 million in 2017, hoping to convince his online fans of his legitimacy as the charismatic leader. The fact is for Hun Sen, the number of Facebook fans, which are imagined space and power social media, appears to necessarily reflect actual political support despite countless ongoing intimidation. Meanwhile, social media platform like Facebook is a critical means for him and his party to connect with his supporters as he has been, again, living in exile and losing the offline battleground to cultivate support.

The question remains why Hun Sen and the ruling government have not controlled social media as tightly as traditional media. Observers tend to agree Cambodia is a blend of “outright freedom and outright suppression” (Strangio, 2014, p. 207) when it comes to freedom of expression. Allowing a manageable opposition legitimises Cambodia as a democracy, and allowing a limited space for the opposition voice can also help the ruling regime to keep surveillance on the opposition’s agenda. It is a regime type which employs both carrots and sticks policies; they co-opt some challengers and repress others (Young, 2016).

As the opposition has increasingly been gaining voice as in 2013 election, the ruling party has begun to restrict critical voice on social media. A cybercrime draft law has been discussed, in which comments that are deemed to instigate insecurity and instability or even “harm” national image are punishable with a jail sentence. Political persecution has become frequent in the last few years. In 2015, an opposition senator was arrested and imprisoned for sharing a controversial video clip in which he accused the government of signing a treaty that resulted in the loss of territory to Vietnam (Cheang, 2015). Another member of parliament from the opposition party has also been arrested after posting what the government called a “fake” map of Cambodia on Facebook. He has been charged with public incitement and jailed (Mech, 2016). At least two cases of arrests have also occurred where individuals were accused of “insulting” the Prime Minister on Facebook. In 2017, the Cambodia National Rescue Party of Sam Rainsy and Kem Soka was dissolved, and their members of parliament were banned from political activities for five years prior to the 2018 national elections; it was when Cambodian People’s Party of Hun Sen claimed all seats in the national assembly. The popularity that Hun Sen has cultivated from online, having more than 13 million fans on Facebook, reverberates offline political support regardless of the perpetuated crackdown on (virtual and physical)

space of civic antagonist activities (grassroots communities, NGOs, media outlets) and the main opposition party (Schröder & Young, 2019).

This virtual space is, however, problematic since online activities are subject to digital and cyber surveillance, mostly committed by the rulers, in collaboration with the pro-ruler corporations, who have power and capacity to enforce relevant cyber regulations at the ruling party's advantages (Young, forthcoming A, B). Crackdown on online activism and activities are observed in contemporary Cambodia's online activities even though it is claimed to have more space rather than offline (on street protests). Anyone subscribed to this virtual space is submitting to the surveillance system of the ruling party whose corporatist alliances own and manage all internet service providers and telephone networks (Young, forthcoming B).

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