

Social Media Drives Youth Involvement in Cambodia's National Elections

BY FAINE GREENWOOD | Wednesday, July 31 2013



Kem Sokha (left) and Sam Rainsy, leaders of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (credit: Faine Greenwood)

Cambodia's June 28 national elections ushered in the dawn of a new age of electoral politics in the small, southeast Asian country. A hotly contested election saw unprecedented political engagement coming from the country's youth - those under 25 years old. And in an indirect way, Mark Zuckerberg and friends are responsible.

As of June 30 the ruling [Cambodian People's Party](#) appears to have won the elections, but the opposition [Cambodian National Rescue Party](#), led by [Sam Rainsy](#) and [Kem Sokha](#), has made unprecedented gains, picking up 55 seats to the ruling party's 68.

Claiming there was [massive voter fraud](#), with a [reported 1 million voters left off the polling station lists](#), the CNRP has [rejected the election results](#). The party is calling for the establishment of a joint committee to investigate the allegations of vote rigging. As the nation waits for the final tally of votes to be announced, one thing is clear: the Internet has played a pivotal role in the 2013 Cambodian elections.

This election campaign was defined especially by the [increased participation of young people](#), where 30 percent of the population is between the ages of 15-24, making it Southeast Asia's youngest country.

Increased Internet access

With increased access to the Internet, young Cambodians have been flocking to Facebook. Both the ruling [Cambodian People's Party](#) and the recently-founded [Cambodian National Rescue Party](#) have attempted to capitalize on this new generation of tech-happy youth. The efforts seem to have galvanized the vote especially in the direction of the CNRP.

Cambodia's overall Internet penetration has increased significantly over recent years, although it is still very low.

In December 2012 the Cambodian Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication [reported 2.7 million Internet users](#), with 27 ISPs serving a population of 14.5 million. At 19.1 million, there are more SIM cards in Cambodia than people. According to Internet World Stats.com, Cambodia had 742,220 Internet users as of Dec 31, 2012, which translates into an Internet penetration rate of 5 percent. Facebook, which is often an accurate barometer of Internet use, has an [estimated 740,000 accounts originating in Cambodia](#), a number that is increasing rapidly.

Courting the youth vote on Facebook

The CNRP platform has revolved around the theme of "Change or No Change," promising an end to the regime of [Hun Sen](#), who has been in power since 1986. Hun Sen has presided over both remarkable economic improvements and ever-worsening corruption that often hits the poorest Cambodians the hardest.

As they courted the youth vote, the CNRP paid special attention to Facebook, where it could circumvent a mass-media that is overwhelmingly controlled by the CPP and by CPP supporters. Sam Rainsy and the CNRP gathered thousands of Facebook likes in the run-up to the election with 181,909 likes on [Rainsy's page](#) alone, outpacing Prime Minister Hun Sen's 76,263.

When a *Phnom Penh Post* reporter pointed out these facts to Hun Sen, he sniffed that he [wasn't interested in participating in a social media popularity contest](#). But the CPP page became noticeably more active almost immediately after that interview.

Throughout the campaign, the CNRP Facebook page was regularly updated with images of Rainsy and Kem Sokha on the campaign trail, as well as inspirational passage, news, and notices alerting youth to get out and vote. The administrators of the CPP page operated along much the same lines, although they provided updates much less frequently. Meanwhile, Cambodian Minister of Information and CPP member [Khieu Kanharith](#) has been active on Facebook for years, often preferring to contact journalists through the social network's chat function.

Perhaps most importantly, Facebook provided Cambodian voters with an independent news and information outlet that did not suffer from the same restrictions as the largely state-controlled media. This is a new development, one that proved a major factor in the CNRP's surprising gains.

Many opposition supporters were outraged when none of Cambodia's major television networks covered opposition leader Sam Rainsy's [surprise return from self-imposed exile](#), only days before the election. Although crowds of thousands lined the streets of the capital city to welcome the bespectacled leader, local TV stations showed mundane programming. Cambodians were confronted directly with the silence of the mainstream media.

Circumventing state-controlled media

Both state and private television limited their coverage of widespread anger over alleged voting irregularities during the July 28 vote, as [reported by Human Rights Watch](#), and continues to devote relatively muted attention to the ongoing controversy over the count.

But increasingly, the mainstream media's self-censorship, which is a consequence of both corruption and fear, doesn't matter anymore. Photos and video of Rainsy's return, [rioting in Phnom Penh's Stung Meanchey district](#) over alleged voting irregularities, and footage of supposed [indelible ink washing away from the fingers](#) of voters with the application of a wet rag were all shared and re-shared on Facebook, and instantly viewed by voters across the nation.

"Without this social media, and the photos, most people would not believe it," said Cambodian Center for Human Rights chief Ou Virak of the images and video of Rainsy supporters and widespread anger over the vote. "But when they see the videos and the photos, they do believe that it's possible for the opposition to win."

Political parties also have found that social media enables them to organize with efficiency and speed that were unthinkable as recently as 2008, when the last national elections were held.

On July 30, Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha held a Buddhist ceremony at a memorial devoted to the victims of a deadly — and politically motivated — [1997 grenade attack](#). Although they posted the details and location of the ceremony a mere 30 minutes or so before it took place, hundreds of people showed up to attend the gathering. This incident could prove to be a template over the coming weeks, if the CNRP continues to protest the voting results.

Their newfound access to different perspectives on political affairs appears to have motivated young Cambodians. Many have become involved in the political process, both for the CPP and the CNRP.

"The young voters share more," said Committee For Free And Fair Elections (COMFREL) chairman Koul Panha. "It's not only the CNRP, but the CPP also influences young people. Sharing things among themselves, they learn from each other, and then people start to follow which information that they think is important."

Spreading the word

When it comes to technology, of course, Cambodia's rural hinterlands may not look like particularly fertile grounds for innovation. But there's an often overlooked factor here: the thousands of Cambodians who leave their homes in the provinces to work in more urbanized areas, such as Phnom Penh or Siem Reap. These people may earn an income and spend most of their time in the cities, but when the holidays roll around, or when it comes time to vote, they head home.

When home, they'll talk to their families, friends, and whoever will listen about what they've seen and heard on the mass media. Increasingly they are also talking about what they have seen on Facebook.

"There will be people in the provinces who won't see any of the videos or photos, who will ask their neighbors if it's true," said Cambodian Center for Human Rights chairman Ou Virak, noting that many of his own employees have traveled home to the provinces for the voting period.

Koul Panha agrees that the family factor cannot be easily discounted among the Cambodian electorate. "Some young people complain to their families that there's no variety of

information on much of the mainstream media. That's why they try to show their family member evidence from Youtube or Facebook — showing them that the mainstream media isn't true," he said.

The dark side: online incitement

But the rise of social media usage in Cambodia has by no means engendered only positivity and sunshine. A [page devoted to "CPP Bashing"](#) has over 7,000 members, all vocal about their disdain for the ruling party and its leader, who they describe as "Saddam Hun Sen." Many use their real names to post, when they might have been reluctant to espouse such views publicly in the past. Another "Anti Hun Sen" group has 27,216 members. There do not appear to be similar groups started by the CPP against CNRP, although individual CPP supporters have used social media to express their own animosity toward political opponents.

The darker side of Cambodia's technological democracy is not limited to mere bashing of the ruling party. Many Cambodians, new to the usage of social media, have not yet learned how to discern between true and false information on the Internet, often [sharing and believing images and stories that are fabricated](#) or simply wrong.

Racial tension has also come to the fore as the elections wear on. The CNRP has run on a platform espousing animosity towards Vietnamese immigrants, attitudes that have also found disturbingly fertile ground on the Internet. Post-election, many comments on Cambodian Facebook groups express distrust, dislike, or even hatred of the Vietnamese. It is not uncommon to read the accusation that Vietnamese interfered in the July 28 election results. Videos on Facebook portray people identified as Vietnamese voting and being rebuffed by the crowd. These videos have further enflamed prejudices.

The Internet genie is out of the bottle

But this election has proven that social media is no longer a fringe element in Cambodian society. It is increasingly moving to the fore of the political process.

"I think social media has contributed a great deal to the election outcome this year by providing a platform to people to share and receive information that much of the censored mainstream media didn't do its best," noted blogger and analyst [Kounila Keo](#) of the results. "In short, I feel that social media is becoming one of the most powerful tools used by citizens to keep each other informed, not just giving and receiving but on an advocacy level."

The autonomy that social media affords Cambodian citizens is important, agrees digital media specialist [Tharum Bun](#). "Digital technologies, not just the Internet, have impacted so much for this year's election, especially when citizens are able to provide first-hand information, news updates and pictures, to the public via their smart phones," he observed. "It's the citizens' exercise of their power."

What does the future hold for social media and democracy in Cambodia? Maintaining access to an open Internet will be key to the successful development of a democracy here — and some in power in Cambodia are well aware that they will need to get the Internet under control if they wish to maintain dominance in the long-term.

"I think in this year maybe it's too little," says Ou Virak. "I think in 2018 that the impact will be huge, if they don't close down the social media like Facebook."

"While it is still difficult for real democracy to exist, this emerging e-democracy is paving the way for civic engagement toward a more democratic society," notes Keo. "These young people are hungry for change in their lives and as they say, the next generation."

Whatever the outcome of the 2013 Cambodian elections, one thing is clear: an online democracy is here to stay in Cambodia.

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