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**Authoritarian Rule Shedding its Populist Skin: How loss of independent media in the 2017 crackdown shapes rural politics in Cambodia**

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# Authoritarian Rule Shedding its Populist Skin: How loss of independent media in the 2017 crackdown shapes rural politics in Cambodia

Laura Schoenberger, Alice Beban, and Vanessa Lamb

## Abstract

*Cambodia burst onto global news headlines when Supreme Court, stacked with ruling party affiliated judges, dissolved the main opposition party in November 2017. Behind this political spectacle lay a series of smaller changes—legal reforms, closures of independent media outlets, criminalisation of activists, creation of state-controlled social media platforms, as well as broader geopolitical shifts legitimating authoritarian rule—that paved the way for the crackdown. We argue that the Cambodian ruling party’s crackdown in 2017 signals a move away from an explicitly populist authoritarianism centred around Hun Sen -- the world’s longest ruling Prime Minister -- towards a deepening of authoritarianism that sheds much of its populist rhetoric. The ruling party’s brand of authoritarian populism previously focused on rural areas, making the rural a key part of the national imaginary, while at the same time subjecting rural areas to violence and state intimidation. Now, Cambodia’s ruling elite are turning their attention to urban areas and closing the spaces people have carved out for rural emancipatory struggle, targeting in particular independent media outlets. We interviewed fifteen Cambodian journalists who lost their jobs in the crackdown. Their accounts make clear the pervasive theme of loss in the wake of the crackdown: loss of accountability; loss of rural people’s voice; and loss of hope for rural social movements. These Cambodian voices illustrate another dimension of loss: the loss of contentious journalism practiced by justice-oriented citizens who communicate to the population analytically rich accounts of the forces reshaping their country. Regionally, authoritarian politics have co-opted what were once heralded progressive online spaces, particularly social media, disciplining online users and retooling the platform to promote the leader and the party. Left behind is the rural: farmers who cannot listen to independent news while harvesting rice; organizers who cannot reach out to journalists to cover their plight; and a media landscape that is being remade around online platforms just as rural activists delete their social media to avoid imprisonment.*

**Keywords:** authoritarian populism; rural social movements; independent media; media activism; Cambodia

## Introduction

In September 2017, as we embarked on our ERPI research project, news headlines flooded with stories of the Cambodian ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), launching an offensive against independent media and opposition politics. In the space of days, the government shutdown independent radio broadcasting and closed a newspaper known for its hard-hitting stories. The radio and print outlets that have been shut down were critical to emancipatory rural politics due to their reporting on land and resource struggles in isolated communities—reporting that allowed rural people's voices to reach a national and international audience. As the CPP closed media outlets, they also increased surveillance over social media, making it dangerous for rural people to use Facebook or other social media to communicate, and they pushed their own state news app, "Fresh News", to spread pro-government propaganda. This crackdown on media and opposition politics paved the way for the arrest of the main opposition party's leader and the Supreme Court-ruled dissolution of the party in November 2017. At the time of writing, the slide into authoritarianism continues and new laws are being promoted to shrink oppositional spaces further.

Facing a situation in flux, we redesigned our research to understand this moment. We were uncertain of the risks to ourselves and to our participants if we tried to conduct field research on authoritarianism in the midst of the crackdown—especially because the ruling party accused Canadian and American professors of conspiring against the government, and international relations were quickly deteriorating. But when we saw a Twitter post advertising the services of the journalists who had lost their livelihoods in the crackdown, we saw the possibility for an alternative way to engage. We consulted two Cambodian journalists and hired one as a research assistant. In late 2017, our research assistant conducted interviews with 15 journalists (including 12 men and 3 women) who previously worked with two of the most important media outlets for rural social struggle: *The Cambodia Daily* newspaper, and *Radio Free Asia Cambodia*. Trust was necessary for participants and the interviewer to speak openly, so our team sought potential interview participants through a snowball method, contacting former colleagues and these colleagues' contacts. We chose to interview only Cambodian journalists and reporters (as opposed to also including their foreign counterparts) who lost their jobs in the 2017 crackdown as a political choice: to draw out their voices and to suggest what is lost when these actors are removed from public discourse. We also integrate interview data we previously collected with rural people living in land conflict areas to show the importance of the media for rural social struggle.

We focus on two cases—the closure of a newspaper and the shuttering of independent radio broadcasters—to understand new pressures on democracy in Cambodia and its implications for rural struggles and the potential for emancipatory politics. We argue that the Cambodian ruling party's crackdown in 2017 signals a move *away* from an explicitly populist authoritarianism centred around Hun Sen—the world's longest ruling Prime Minister—towards a deepening of authoritarianism that sheds much of its populist rhetoric. In rural Cambodia, smallholder farmers have long struggled to hold onto their land in the face of large-scale 'land grabbing' for agribusiness concessions and speculation. Although rural people have confronted dispossession, violence, and intimidation, the ruling party has selectively performed 'good governance', making the rural a key part of the national imaginary. In shedding its populist leanings, the regime is now shifting away from efforts to win over the support of rural people, to a new form of hard-line authoritarianism that leaves rural people increasingly under-served. In the wake of the crackdown, with no opposition party to campaign against, the rural smallholder farmer appears to be cast aside by the ruling party.

Our contribution to the debates on authoritarian populism and the rural world (Scoones et al 2018), then, is to analyse what the media shutdown means for rural people. In Cambodia's post-conflict period, the media has played a key role in emancipatory rural politics. Rural social movements engage in 'media activism', using media tactically to keep informed, spread their message and pressure those in power, and committed journalists practice 'contentious journalism', connecting with rural activists to make sure their voices are heard (Weiss 2014). The journalists we interviewed, as well as accounts of rural people in land conflict areas, make clear the pervasive theme of loss in the wake of the

crackdown: loss of accountability; loss of rural people's voice; and loss of hope for rural social movements. Journalists were especially critical of what is left: social media platforms that authoritarian actors can easily co-opt to reshape what is considered 'news'. Social media also offers an easy platform by which to spread fear and intimidation, and to surveil the population, as users can be disciplined and 'made an example of' for expressing dissenting views.

In what follows, we first outline the historical context of populist authoritarianism in Cambodia and then detail the role of media in Cambodia prior to the 2017 crackdown. Our review of more than 100 news articles reveals how the crackdown was not just an event or moment of closure, but a strategic series of changes that occurred over many months and years. We then draw on our interviews with journalists and rural people to identify the losses that the media shutdown implies for emancipatory rural politics, including a loss of government accountability, loss of awareness of rural struggles, and a loss of hope. We finish by reflecting on the potential role social media can play in opening new spaces for rural struggles.

### **New forms of populist authoritarianism in Cambodia**

Cambodia's ruler, Hun Sen—currently the longest-serving Prime Minister in the world—rose to power in the 1980s following years of American bombing, civil conflict and the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. Hun Sen complicates the story of a *recent* turn to populist authoritarianism; for more than thirty years, he has in many ways been the archetypal populist strongman, who “frequently circumvents, eviscerates or captures democratic institutions, even as it uses them to legitimate its dominance, centralise power and crush or severely limit dissent” (Scoones *et al.* 2018). He and his party (the Cambodian People's Party or CPP) have long combined terror and censorship with personalised political handouts, promises of post-war stability and a veneer of democracy (Schoenberger and Beban *in press*, Springer 2013, Milne 2015). When the post-war state was formed under Vietnamese occupation in the 1980s, Cambodia's ruling party established tight surveillance at the village level that prevented resistance and channelled resources through shifting, informal networks; many of these characteristics persist, providing the basis for ongoing control (Milne 2015, 42). Since the 1990s United Nations-supported shift to an electoral democracy, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) have intensified their grip on power through these politico-business networks (Milne *et al.* 2015). State officials and business elite are given access to lucrative contracts and Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) in exchange for loyalty—what scholars have termed a 'neo-patrimonial' or 'shadow state' system (Le Billon 2002; Le Billon and Springer 2007; Un and So 2011). ELCs and other informal land grabs are estimated to cover over one-third of arable land, displacing thousands of people and putting pressure on the commons resources needed for social reproduction (Loehr 2012, Biddulph 2014, Gironde and Peeters 2015). Rural people near ELCs live on the 'margins', where the rules that govern life are uncertain, and a subtext of violence, fear and threat is part of everyday life (Beban and Schoenberger *forthcoming*, Schoenberger and Beban *in press*).

At the same time as rural areas have become 'sacrifice zones' (Scoones *et al.* 2018, 5) for the enrichment of domestic and international elite, rural voters have long been the most consistent and reliable supporters of Hun Sen's government. As a predominantly rural country, appeals to 'the people' have centred on rural farmers, and the archetypal Khmer paddy rice farmer is romanticised in political rhetoric and cultural representations. In Cambodia's post-genocidal context, many rural people crave the stability and relative peace that Hun Sen's regime has provided; Hun Sen and the ruling party regularly campaign as the party that overthrew the Khmer Rouge. Hun Sen's war-time prowess and claims to powerful spiritual connections, as well as the party's 'gift giving' in rural areas, has allowed the party to marginalize opposition and build an elaborate system of mass patronage and mobilization (Hughes 2006, Un and So 2009, 2011, Hughes 2013, Norén-Nilsson 2016). During elections, CPP candidates give voters food, scarves, and noodles, while those who support the ruling party receive 'gifts' of schools and improved infrastructure. Rural people's importance is seen in massive pre-election campaigns like the Prime Minister's land titling initiative. This campaign sent

out thousands of university student volunteers to survey and title state land prior to the 2013 national election, resulting in 1.8 million hectares of land transferred from large concessionaires to smallholders in the form of 610,000 land titles (c.f. Milne 2013, Grimsditch and Schoenberger 2015, Beban *et al.* 2017, Schoenberger 2017). This gift giving works in tandem with practices that discipline those who do not support the ruling party. The CPP's efforts to keep the opposition party out of sub-national government mean that the opposition struggled until recently to build rural campaign networks and attract candidates.

Hun Sen's regime, with its nod to democratic institutions, has offered spaces for civil society to gain strength, albeit in fragile ways. In the past decade, rural people struggling to hold onto their land have become more outspoken and connected. Groups of rural people around the country have mobilised for their land in the face of violent state repression and some of these social movements, such as the Prey Long Forest Network, have attracted international attention. Emancipatory rural politics emerge from particular histories of struggle that condition pathways of transformation (Scoones *et al.* 2018, 9), and the alternative visions that emerge in Cambodian rural social movements (and through independent media representations of these movements) are shaped by Cambodia's genocidal past—a genocide that took place under a regime that was the result of an uprising of disenfranchised rural peasants, and communist in name. Cambodians are wary of renewed violence. Rather than a revolutionary post-capitalist vision, rural social movements have tended to focus on the immediate goals of reclaiming or holding onto land, within a broader politics that could be described as seeking a more inclusive democratic capitalism. They have had some successes; while many groups continue to struggle with no resolution, some people have received land back, or gained compensation (Beban and Work 2014, Lamb *et al.* 2017, Schoenberger 2017). The establishment of independent media institutions has played central roles in rural social struggles, connecting isolated rural communities, acting as a conduit for rural leaders to speak to a national audience, shining a spotlight on the actions of corrupt officials, and pressuring central government for change.

Cambodia's current political shifts are enabled by rural people's efforts to press for change, as well as broader geopolitical shifts that have emboldened Hun Sen. Aid donors including the US, EU and Japan, that flocked to Cambodia in the post-conflict period and continue to provide almost a billion dollars to the government's purse strings each year, have been outflanked by China's growing infrastructural support, which does not require the same human rights conditions -- even if only lip service. The US, which has long leaned on its purchasing power and aid budget to shape Cambodian international relations, has seen its role reshaped by Trump's presidency. Analysts have argued that Trump's near-total disengagement on Southeast Asia, coupled with his own attacks on US media, have emboldened Hun Sen (Robertson 2017). In February 2017, for example, the Cambodian Council of Ministers spokesman threatened to "crush" media entities that may threaten "peace and stability" and referred to Trump's treatment of the press to justify his statement (quoted in Nachemson 2017). The Prime Minister has applauded Trump's effort to go after "fake news" and in January 2018 applauded Trump's 'fake news awards':

Even in the US they have this kind of press and the US president created press awards for fake and lying news. In Cambodia this type of press happens. It does not respect Cambodia's law and when it is revealed, it acts as the victim to get pity from foreign governments. This case should not happen again. (quoted in Ben 2018)

Such shifts in global geopolitics has further enabled Hun Sen to air past grievances with the US' policies of the 1980s. In Cambodians' collective memory (although usually unacknowledged in the West), the US is associated with a 1970 coup that pushed out the Prince, the bombing campaign from 1969-73 that brought the Khmer Rouge to power, and with prolonging the civil war and crisis with the Khmer Rouge (1979-98) by supporting the Khmer Rouge as the representatives of Cambodia the UN in the 1980s.

Hun Sen has seized upon people's latent anti-Western sentiment and sought to develop deeper forms of us'/them' politics, aggressively deploying 'us/them' rhetoric to draw suspicion over the opposition



party and Western-funded media and NGOs. Hun Sen argues that there is a ‘colour revolution’ seeking to overthrow the regime, spearheaded by the main opposition party, and aided by US funds and expertise devoted to toppling the government. In speeches to thousands of urban garment factory workers (a key constituency of the opposition party), the Prime Minister justifies the government’s actions by arguing that “now we just use the law to protect the... security and peace of our country, but they said that we violate human rights. But [the US] shot, killed and dropped bombs on our people” (quoted in Ben and Handley 2017).

We see the Cambodian government’s 2017 crackdown on political and civic institutions as a move *away* from an explicitly populist authoritarianism towards a deepening of authoritarianism that sheds much of its populist rhetoric. As news headlines such as ‘*Cambodia’s descent into dictatorship*’ suggest, the Cambodian state has done away with any pretence of democracy by silencing the press and dissolving the opposition. But it is important to note that the regime has not simply cracked down; Hun Sen is also developing new populist platforms to rebuild his legitimacy amongst a public that is growing tired of land grabbing, corruption and political nepotism. The co-optation of independent media and creation of new state-mouthpieces is crucial to this new form of (deeper) authoritarian populism. This new form of populism also targets the growing urban population—the main base of support for opposition politics—rather than the rural communities who have formed the backbone of ruling party support since the 1990s.

### **The evolution in the media landscape in post-conflict Cambodia**

The apparent openness of the 2000s has had contradictory effects for rural social movements; it has enabled spaces for independent media, human rights NGOs, opposition politics, and rural activist networks to grow, while also allowing murkier processes of control through the surveillance of journalists, activists and researchers. The media landscape in Cambodia embodies these contradictions, as we explore in this section.

The Paris Peace Accords, signed in 1991, promised to end the conflict in Cambodia and usher in democracy, one component of which was press freedom. The news media had been severely restricted during the Khmer Rouge period, and the ensuing State of Cambodia (SOC) had seven Soviet-style media outlets, with no private news media (Clarke, 2000). The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), established in 1992 under the terms of the Paris Peace Accords, had the task of promoting media freedom. UNTAC created a model radio station, “Radio UNTAC”, to inform Cambodians in the lead-up to the first post-war elections in 1993. This station transmitted 15 hours per day, broadcasting news about the upcoming election. Supporting these efforts, the Japanese government financed the distribution of 346,000 radios throughout rural areas (McDaniel 2007, Strangio 2017). During the UNTAC period two English-language newspapers were established: the *Phnom Penh Post*, founded in mid-1992, and the *Cambodia Daily*, in 1993. The new 1993 Constitution contained guarantees of “freedom of expression, press, publication, and assembly” (Jennar 1995).

Strangio notes that although UNTAC “pried open space for a rambunctious press”, press diversity has since declined as the CPP consolidated its control (Strangio 2017, 76). The newspapers and radio stations that proliferated from the 1990s struggled to attract paid advertising and many are financed by political parties or wealthy politico-business elite. Bribing journalists to write slanted stories is common, and if this doesn’t work, those who wish to influence news coverage turn to intimidation, threats of force, and occasionally violence and murder. The Committee to Protect Journalists list 12 journalists murdered in Cambodia since 1993 (Strangio 2017) and Cambodia is ranked 139 out of 180 countries worldwide for press freedom (Mueller 2015). This system of patronage and intimidation has meant that almost all Khmer-language print and broadcast outlets are now aligned or sympathetic to the CPP and Hun Sen, and tend to project pro-government viewpoints (Loo 2006, McDaniel 2007, MoM 2016). Cambodian human rights NGO Licadho (2008) notes that this control of the media landscape has been achieved through a combination of “politics, money and fear”.

There were a few exceptions to the ruling party's control, however. The foreign-language newspapers, *Cambodia Daily* and *The Phnom Penh Post*, are deemed more trustworthy, and are known for their hard-hitting reports on sensitive issues like land grabbing, government corruption, illegal logging and political violence (MoM 2016). These print outlets only reach 11 percent of the population, mainly urban people with an education. However, the *Cambodia Daily* had a greater reach in rural areas as its news features are read out on Radio Free Asia, and its English edition, which include weekly language lessons, make it a popular medium for those studying English. Journalists we interviewed repeatedly noted that the Daily has a wide reach because "even if people couldn't read the Daily, RFA would report on their stories (Interviewee #1)<sup>1</sup>, showing the ways these two formats combine to engender a culture of information.

Broadcasting commands greater influence than print media. TV reaches 96 percent of Cambodians, and 57 percent of Cambodians say they watch the TV news (MoM 2016). However, TV is also the most highly concentrated media, and all stations are characterized as "totally owned or controlled by the government or CPP" (Strangio 2017, 76). TV "news" has been characterized as little more than "footage of Hun Sen and other senior officials delivering speeches, slicing ribbons, and handing out gifts to the poor", while coverage of opposition parties rallies and protests is notably absent (Strangio 2017, 82). Even the opposition leader's return to Cambodia after four years in self-exile to a crowd of more 100,000 was not broadcast on TV. Tellingly, a sign purportedly hangs on the wall of the Apsara TV newsroom which reads: "*Banned from broadcasting: Stories on human rights and land disputes*" (Strangio 2017, 82).

Before mid-2017, radio was the most fragmented, or freest, media, with a number of stations run by NGOs or overseas funders. Beehive Radio 105FM, one of the country's only independent broadcasters, ran on a license obtained by its Franco-Cambodian director, Mam Sonando, in 1994, before the government consolidated media control. Beehive sold its radio time to US government-funded Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Voice of America (VOA), both of which have been refused their own broadcast licenses, yet were the most popular radio programmes throughout the country on 15 different radio stations (MoM 2016, Strangio 2017). Radio is particularly important for rural people because it is a low-cost medium that does not require literacy or commercial power and can be carried anywhere. It is not unusual to see radios perched on the edge of rice fields while people are working. In 2014, for example, one of us helped a group of around 15 farmers who harvested their fields using reciprocal labour; the group transported a small radio with them as they went from field to field and turned it up loud to broadcast RFA's news programmes. The importance of radio in rural areas also came through in a survey that one of us undertook in 2015 with 365 people in three provinces (encompassing two rural areas and one urban area). Many rural people in land conflict areas talked about how they gained a sense of security by listening to the radio, including critical news programs such as Radio Free Asia that kept them informed about government actions and land activism. Urban respondents placed significantly less weight on listening to the radio<sup>2</sup>.

Internet use is now rapidly increasing and online news is an important player in the media landscape. Social media now outranks TV as the 'go-to' source of news for Cambodians (Meyn 2017). By 2015, approximately 1.76 million Cambodians had joined Facebook and an estimated 1,100 new users join each day (Strangio 2017, 84). The popularity of the internet has enabled a proliferation of news sources, although popular radio and print stations have some of the largest audiences on their Facebook pages (RFA, for example, has the most popular radio media Facebook page with more than 5 million fans). During the 2013 political deadlock, digital media became a key source of information, especially the Facebook sites of politicians. Owning a smartphone doesn't automatically provide

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<sup>1</sup> We do not identify the participants in this paper in order to maintain their safety.

<sup>2</sup> In rural Kampong Chhnang province, people said that 'listening to the radio' provided "some" to "a lot" of security' (average 2.9 on a scale of 0-4, where 0 = provided no security and 4 = provided complete security). While in Phnom Penh, the average was significantly lower at 1.85.



access though; as one journalist we interviewed said, in rural areas people may not have the cash to regularly access internet:

The people in the city have no problem accessing information. They can use Facebook. But this is a big problem for the people living in rural areas. Any family who has children working as garment workers has smartphones to access internet and Facebook, but they don't have money to pay for internet. They can only listen sometimes. (#13)

This gap between rural and urban media access is echoed in a recent national survey, which found that almost half of Cambodians now own a smartphone; but while 42 percent of urban respondents used their phone to access the internet, only 27 percent of rural users accessed internet (Phong *et al.* 2016, 27).

The difficulty of maintaining internet access and state control over TV networks means that independent radio and print were important sources of news for rural people. But regular access to these media was also difficult. In the post-UNTAC period, relative openness to the media has alternated with crackdowns that tend to coincide with national elections or political tensions (Strangio 2017). After the 2008 national election, editors of opposition-aligned publications were charged with defamation and disinformation, and by 2010 most opposition-aligned media outlets were forced to close (Strangio 2017, 81). Another crack-down occurred over the 2013 national election cycle, and rural people we spoke with said they could not tune into local politically-focused radio channels for months around the election. Even in periods of relative openness, journalists are regularly intimidated, detained and even murdered for their reporting. In a 2007 survey of 150 reporters, 54 percent said they had been threatened with physical harm or legal action in the course of their work (LICADHO 2008, 56). State officials regularly threaten reporters with 'friendly' warnings, text messages, anonymous phone calls, or public shaming on national TV, while wrapping these threats in inducements such as cash or jobs in the government's PR department in exchange for reporters' acquiescence (Strangio 2017, 82).

Threats can be most violent when journalists seek to cover sensitive political issues such as rural land grabbing (as researchers of land grabs, we also encountered similar threats and uncertainty, c.f. Beban and Schoenberger *forthcoming*, Schoenberger and Beban *in press*, 2017) All the journalists we spoke with recounted personal stories of the ways government officials and company representatives tried to block their reporting in rural areas. They detailed the strategies used to intimidate journalists, which ranged from officials and other politico-business elite dodging requests for interviews (#13); walking away from interviews (#14); asking for written request and leaving journalists waiting for weeks (#11); refusing to provide documents (required under the law to access information) (#10); accusing journalists of being from 'foreign' or 'rebel' radio stations (#14); threatening journalists with lawsuits (#11, #13); and detaining journalists (#7). Several interviewees talked about the ways these threats have escalated in the past year. One journalist exclaimed: "In 2017, we got a lot of threats and restrictions... Some of us were blacklisted" (#2). This journalist's experience suggests another crackdown on the media in the run up to the 2018 national elections, but this time, as we detail below, the media crackdown was part of a deepening of authoritarian rule with far-reaching implications.

## **The 2017 Crackdown**

Cambodia exploded onto global news headlines when the ruling party legally dissolved the main opposition party in November 2017. But this shift to naked authoritarianism depended on a series of smaller moments—legal changes, media censorship, criminalising activists, as well as broader geopolitical shifts legitimating authoritarian rule—that paved the way for the crackdown. The creation of new state-controlled social media platforms was also crucial in 'discovering' and spreading sensationalist stories that slandered the opposition and angled towards legitimating the use of legal mechanisms against them. In this section, we draw on our analysis of over 100 domestic and international media reports on the crackdown to show how small legislative changes and informal political censorship came together to set the stage for the turn to deeper authoritarian rule.

The 2013 national election is a key moment at which to begin the story of the crackdown, as the CPP had its worst outcome since 1998. The united opposition party, the CNRP, won 44% of the popular vote. Strikes erupted in Phnom Penh in the aftermath of the election and persisted for half the year until a minimum wage strike by garment factory workers escalated and military police shot dead five protesters. The ruling party quickly cleared the streets of remaining protest activity and enacted new pieces of legislation to prevent them. Then, in the June 2017 sub-national ('Commune') elections, the CNRP shocked the ruling party by winning almost half the popular vote and gaining 482 commune seats. This was a massive gain on the 40 seats won by opposition parties in the previous commune election in 2012. The results signalled an important shift not only in urban areas, which have long been the main seat of opposition politics, but also in rural areas, where the ruling party's networks are more embedded.

In the lead up to these 2017 elections, the ruling party deployed a series of vicious threats. Hun Sen warned that if the ruling party 'lost patience' with the opposition then there would be war (quoted in Touch and Willemyns 2017). The Minister of Defense threatened to "smash the teeth" of political opponents (quoted in Sek and Paviour 2017). Nevertheless, many people voted for change. The result for this subnational election was a 'wake-up call' to the CPP that they were at risk of being unseated in the 2018 National Election (#12).

The ruling party stepped up press censorship and threats of military intervention as their grip on power appeared to be slipping and rural land activists, urban youth, and civil society organizations, typically marginalized voices, were growing increasingly vocal in independent media and online. Government surveillance of Facebook has led to several arrests, including a university student sentenced to 18-months jail for a Facebook post on the 'colour revolution'; a CNRP senator sentenced to 7-years imprisonment for 'incitement' following a Facebook post; and a woman charged with incitement for posting a video on Facebook showing her throwing her sandal at a CPP billboard. A series of quiet law changes have facilitated this criminalisation of civil society, including the Law on NGOs and Associations (2015), which limits the ability for people to gather informally and increases surveillance of NGOs, and changes to the national media code in 2017 that allows the government to revoke media licenses. The latter of these changes paved the way for the government to shut down 19 independent radio stations that carry reports from Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, and Voice of Democracy in August 2017. In response, RFA shut down its Cambodian bureau and announced it would continue to broadcast and publish on shortwave radio, social media and its website (RFA 2017). Then, on August 29, 2017, the government ordered Cambodia Daily to close after the tax department alleged that the Daily owed USD 6.3 million dollars because it collected "hundreds of thousands of dollars from clients and did not pay tax to the state". This figure was disputed by *The Daily* which was known to operate at a loss, but ultimately resulted in the closure of the newspaper on 4 September 2017.

A news-based smartphone app launched in 2014, 'Fresh News' quickly rose to prominence due to its centrality in the crackdown. With shocking regularity it started and spread sensationalist stories that accuse people of anti-government crimes, then using these same stories to justify arrest and violence. It quickly became apparent that it was a government mouthpiece and an attempt by the ruling party to co-opt online spaces. In August 2017, for example, Fresh News published leaked tax records that alleged tax fraud by RFA, the Cambodia Daily, and other human rights organisations, and the rationale used by the government to force the media outlets to shut down operations. Shortly afterward, Fresh News accused the National Democratic Institute (a US-funded group promoting democracy) of colluding with the opposition to topple the government with help from human rights NGOs and independent media outlets.

The 'fake news' that emerges on Fresh News took hold and gained legitimacy through its repetition on other government broadcasters. For example, when Fresh News claimed that American journalist Geoffrey Cain was a foreign spy working with the CNRP to overthrow Hun Sen's government, photos

of the journalist having dinner with the CNRP leader's daughter (a personal friend of his) were then repeated across pro-government TV news and newspapers, working to legitimate the claim.

In October, Hun Sen went even further in the production of 'fake news', ordering the creation of an inter-ministerial working group, headed by the Minister of Information, to produce anti-opposition 'propaganda'. The Prime Minister also spreads propaganda through emotive speeches that are delivered to key urban audiences, such as garment workers (a group who have shown themselves to be a powerful force for opposition politics in recent years), to spread messages of anti-Western nationalism and threats against the opposition.

With critical media outlets silenced and activists fearful of social media activity and open protests, the way was opened for the government to launch an outright attack on the political opposition. Long-time leader of the opposition, Sam Rainsy was formally exiled in October 2016 and prompted to resign in February 2017 due to amendments to the Law on Political Parties that introduced legal means to prevent convicts from leading political parties, resulting in Rainsy leaving the CNRP. Further amendments to the same law in July were intended to erase Rainsy's presence by prohibiting parties associating with, using the voice or image of, or documents authored by a convict. Further legal moves that year introduced legislation that allowed the government to more easily disband political parties, and to redistribute the seats of banned parties in the National Assembly. Just after midnight on Sunday 3 September (the day before shutting the *Daily*), over one hundred armed soldiers broke into CNRP leader Kem Sokha's house and detained him without warning. Kem Sokha was rushed to a detention centre far from Phnom Penh and would later be charged with treason due to his role in the 2013 protests, now labelled a so-called 'colour revolution' by the ruling party. In November, the Supreme Court dissolved the opposition party, re-assigning its seats and banning 118 individuals from political activities for five years. At the time of the ruling, more than half of the CNRP representatives to the National Assembly had fled the country (Holmes 2017). Hun Sen used the occasion of the dissolution to call for lower level elected CNRP representatives to defect to the CPP, allowing them to retain their sub-national seats under the ruling party and giving them two weeks to jump ship (Ben *et al.* 2017).. The move was widely criticized and seen to mark a new era of authoritarian politics. The Director of Human Rights Watch called the government's actions "a political killing of the Paris Peace accords", the peace agreement signed in 1991 that pushed for a democratically elected government (quoted in Ben *et al.* 2017). But Hun Sen seemed unaffected, calling the Paris agreement "a ghost" (quoted in Ben and Handley 2017).

This dramatic closure of democratic space was facilitated by the government's mounting use of nationalist 'us/them' rhetoric and deploying this rhetoric against the US. On the day Kem Sokha was arrested, Hun Sen claimed during a speech to 4,000 garment factory workers that Kem Sokha had colluded with the US against his government (Pitman and Cheang 2017). Following Sokha's arrest, the government spread paranoid accusations that the opposition was colluding with the US and the European Union to foment a "colour revolution", a name that referred to popular protest movements that have toppled regimes in the former Soviet Bloc and Middle East. At the Supreme Court, lawyers presented evidence that several civil society groups were involved in this alleged revolution, calling US-funded RFA an 'assistant' and US-funded election monitor Comfrel a 'fellow colluder' (quoted in Ben *et al.* 2017). They also justified the dissolution of the opposition party by citing a speech made by US President Donald Trump, in which the President calls for an end to US attempts to topple foreign governments (Ben *et al.* 2017). The government also drew on these allegations of collusion to threaten NGOs that work with land activists. The Minister of Defence accused one land rights NGO, STT, of receiving half a million dollars a year from foreign funders to foment a 'colour revolution' among the land dissent groups it worked with (Niem and Baliga 2017). The Minister asserted that the funds were "to form all these movements to serve the strategy of the Americans" and that the reach extended to nearly 3,000 grassroots communities, all of whom were supposedly anti-government (quoted in Niem and Baliga 2017).

New government research institutions bolstered these claims and are being used to justify a more aggressive stance against dissent (Baliga and Mech 2017). In September, the government created a

“think tank” to study the causes of colour revolution with Chinese support. In mid-December, a new spy school was also announced to combat colour revolution and terrorism in Cambodia. The Prime Minister appointed his son, Hun Manith, who is the Director of Intelligence at the Ministry of Defence, to lead the spy school. The stated aims of the new school are to train soldiers and police in intelligence-gathering, maintaining ‘covert identities’, sniper training and later expand into a strategy and research centre. Hun Sen made clear that media surveillance was a key part of the new school’s activities noting, “I do not want spies to only provide information. The spy needs to have skills to analyse fake news and news resulting from investigation” (quoted in Mech 2017).

These accusations against the media and increased surveillance is intimidating journalists, as one interviewee explained:

They accused us of being involved in politics and colluding to do colour revolution. I don’t want to talk more about this issue because they accused us. Some reporters resigned because they were threatened... and they sent officials to monitor our office.

In our interviews with journalists, many interviewees felt that the crackdown against independent media is intimately tied to the dissolution of the opposition party, and what had been the ruling party’s potentially precarious position in the upcoming 2018 national election. One reporter noted that “*they thought that closing the two media could save their reputation and they could make their campaign through other media organizations that they think support CPP.*” (#12). Others pointed to the importance of “*cutting off information to the international community*” (#15), and allowing election tampering, because “*with the Cambodia Daily [monitoring the election], they can’t cheat to be the winner of the election*” (#15). One reporter asserted that before the government could make its move against the CNRP, the government first needed to shut down the media:

A year before the [2018 national] election, there were a lot of scandalous news [about the opposition] leaking via media that is close to the government, arresting CNRP’s leaders, dissolution of CNRP, and banning more than one hundred CNRP [representatives] from politics. To me, before they could do all these things, they had to restrict or destroy some of the media outlets that write critically about those institutions. They had to destroy the independent media that have differing concepts from them. I knew that *The Daily* is the thorn in the side of the government—the government leaders as well as the officials in the ruling party. They just waited for a good time to kill the media (#7).

What is remarkable about this journalist’s remark is the recognition that spectacular moments of authoritarian politics cannot be analysed in isolation from the longer trajectory of smaller social and political shifts in censorship, legal changes, and the production of affective nationalist rhetoric and fear, that enabled the dissolution of the CNRP to occur without large-scale protest or violence. The moves to ‘kill the media’ were central to this new phase of authoritarian politics. All the journalists we interviewed described the ways in which the media crackdown has deep implications for democracy, and, in particular, implications for the space for emancipatory rural politics, which we turn to in the following section.

**“The Khmer Rouge in the forest have disappeared, but they appear in Phnom Penh”:  
What was lost in the crackdown?**

In this section, we tease out the potential implications of the crackdown by detailing the roles the now-shuttered independent media outlets have played in rural communities, using previously collected data from rural areas and interviews with journalists. The pervasive theme in our interviews with journalists was loss: a loss of accountability; a loss of rural people’s voice; and a loss of hope for rural social movements.

*Loss of accountability and democratic process*

A repeated theme in interviews with journalists was the media's role as a 'mirror' of society that "reflects society's issues" (#5) and "the activity of government" (#9). They saw independent media as necessary to hold the government accountable by publishing stories that allow the government to "know the problem of people who work under them; what did they do wrong?" (#2). One journalist noted:

Media is very important for democratic society. If there is no media, it finishes. Why do I say that? Media is a mirror. And when part of mirror is covered, how can we see the whole of our body? (#4)

Here, this journalist theorises the media's role in maintaining democratic space as the institution that feeds back to the government the results of its actions. The restrictions on media 'cover' the mirror, concealing the view of the body (politic). The notion of seeing one's whole body suggests the nakedness -- the 'true self' -- that the media 'mirror' shows to the state. Therefore, the 'mirror' cannot be blamed for what it shows of one's body for it is simply reflective of the truth, as another journalist noted: "We could not put blame to mirrors when we don't have good face, when we have charcoal on our faces. When we see our faces are bad, we cannot break the mirrors" (#9).

These media also functioned as a mirror because civil servants and politicians read *the Daily* and listened to RFA to help them make decisions (#2). One journalist explained that *the Daily* acted as an 'advisor to the government' and a way to gauge public opinion:

I observe that government officials do not like western media but those people like to read Cambodia Daily. Why? They don't like this newspaper but they want to follow news. What did this newspaper write or criticize? They used Cambodia Daily as their advisors -- to remind them, to wake up when they did something wrong. (#5)

Journalists emphasized a direct link between the media's role as a mirror that 'woke up' government officials and pressured "government to solve the issue" (#14) and changes in policy and people's behaviour (#6). All the journalists we spoke with described concrete cases of social policy change that the government introduced after pressure from media stories spotlighted rural struggles. At the sub-national level, these included news stories that led to a provincial government stepping in to resolve problems between a rural community and an agribusiness concessionaire (#3); cancellation of private fishing lots in the Tonle Sap Lake (#10); delaying an eviction deadline in a coastal province (#11); and reforming the management of hazardous waste at a dump site (#14). At the national level, journalists emphasized the importance of reporting that led to a new law on Violence Against Women and new legislation to protect women entering foreign marriages; the firing of a Secretary of State after a report on his corrupt actions (#2); an investigation by the Ministry of Labour into mass fainting at garment factories (#7); and the Ministry of Health closing a health clinic where women died from poor care (#8).

Interviewees noted that the closure of independent media will disrupt the mirror's ability to force the government to see the consequences of its actions, impacting land disputes and the likelihood they will be settled:

For example, with land disputes, Cambodia Daily gave more voice to victims but the local news cannot do that. The Daily offered opportunities for victims to make requests and to talk about their issues. So, their problems reached government leaders and later on their issues were settled. If there are no independent media outlets, we don't think the local news report their problems. Most local news outlets are under control of, or have a good relationship with, government officials. The [pro-government outlets] instead report the victims to the suspects [i.e. the perpetrators of grabs]. (#7)



As this journalist notes, rural people are highly suspicious of government-run media outlets that are seen to act as surveillance agents for the ruling party. Furthermore, scepticism is also growing toward the remaining independent media outlets, as they are seen to have softened their attitude toward the state (#7). Journalists argued that the ‘breaking’ of the mirror did not just affect the media outlets that were forced to close; following the closures, remaining media outlets were unwilling to take risks or do in-depth reporting on contentious topics:

They have capacity to report but they are scared after the other medias were forced to close. In the articles, they changed the way of writing. Now, it is soft in its meaning. They just want to save organization and they don't want to have the same problem as Cambodia Daily and RFA. And the other thing, they don't have competitors, so they don't write in-depth news and no concern about competition. (#7)

This reporter suggests that the closure of the two outlets had ripple effects: silencing the remaining independent media and civil society voices; and lessening the critiques from the remaining outlets. The so-called ‘softer’ reporting is both because of the lack of business incentive to go deeper, or to chase and break stories, and because they are scared of government retaliation.

### ***Loss of education and awareness***

Across our interviews, journalists repeatedly stated that the independent media presented ‘both sides’ of a story, allowing readers to use their own judgment and develop their skills to critically assess a story. They suggested that readers, particularly rural residents, would no longer have opportunities to develop this skill now that they only had access to pro-government media. In this sense, the journalists saw themselves playing a public education role, where their job was to provide rural people with all the information so they could make their own decisions, as one journalist noted:

I think that RFA trained people to understand about their rights, to know what the government has done so far. We also reported the good job of government, and the wrongdoing of government. We educated them about law because RFA also has law program.

I think most people like to listen to analytical news. Analytical news is not just the writer's opinion, it is the real facts and comes from research, what happens in society, and researchers give comments. It educates people to understand about their rights. (#4)

Enhancing the reach of such public education efforts around the law were the other educational tools offered at relatively low costs for people to build their skills -- skills that would have material benefits. *The Daily*, in particular, extended its reach through weekly English lessons included in newsprint copies. Rural teachers frequently subscribed to *the Daily* for its English lessons, and we have noticed them saved and piled up in rural schools. Even one of the *Daily's* own reporters noted that she learned English first through *the Daily's* study supplements, as many other students are known to do.

Rural people we spoke with prior to the shutdown (during fieldwork in 2013-2015) also spoke about how much they learned from the independent media. They said the radio helped them to understand what was going on around the country, so they could be better informed and potentially use this knowledge when they had their own land disputes:

When we study, when we walk a lot, we can know a lot. I love listening to the radio to find out what is going on (Farmer, 50s)

When we listen to RFA, we hear what is happening with the companies in Ratanakiri, in other parts... gives us ideas about what we can do (woman farmer activist)

This role of the radio in providing information about land grabbing was particularly important in remote areas where the presence of NGOs is limited, or in cases where NGOs were reluctant to help, as one rural activist told us:

We went to the NGO but they couldn't help because it is the military [who grabbed the land], and people don't want to go to the opposition because then we are labelled opposition. And so we go to the radio RFA and their reporter was here last week. I talked with them and [a woman from the village active in the land protests] talked to them... now we hope that something will happen, now we wait to see. (male farmer activist)

In an environment where local elected officials were deemed untrustworthy, the media facilitated raising awareness of government action so they could challenge their local officials, as one rural man recounted:

The NGOs, they don't think about the parties, they want to help everyone.... Like the NGO that distributed the toilets...I listened on the radio that said they were distributing them for free. Just wanting [a few cents] and that's all. But the Village Chief went house to house and said to everyone, 'look, what a bargain, it's only USD 50 dollars'. Even though, the NGO didn't charge anything!... He cheats us. (man, farmer/activist)

Journalists noted that following the crackdown there is no *'true information'* (#12) that can help people make important livelihood decisions with material consequences. They argued that the remaining media just focuses on orchestrated spectacles of the ruling party: *"His Excellency offers a donation to someone"* (#12); *"His Excellency blah-blah-blah visits local people, gives some donations"* (#15). One interviewee continued his critique making the pointed case that rural people don't need to know about Excellencies, they need 'real information' that would help them with rural struggles, such as *"how many trucks export wood, how many trucks are stopped and how many people are arrested. They do not want to know that His Excellency go to build something"* (#15). Journalists complained that the remaining government-controlled news is *"only fake news and twist news"...*and the *"news to serve government"* (#2), that was low quality and couldn't be trusted as it did not seek balanced sources.

### ***Loss of hope***

Journalists saw themselves as *'messengers of the people'*, *'connectors'* and *'bridges'* between dispossessed villagers, local and national officials, and NGO staff, that allowed rural people's voices to be heard, thereby bringing hope to marginalised people. The ability to hang onto hope and 'be brave' is crucial for rural social movements in a context where rural people rarely triumph in land disputes against powerful officials, and often people are too scared to protest violent land dispossession (see Schoenberger and Beban, *in press*). In our interviews with rural people prior to the media crackdown, people in land conflict areas affirmed the idea that the presence of independent media could give people engaged in protracted land struggles hope that they may find a solution:

[The media] gives people bravery because they hear about other struggles, we can know about other struggles (woman, 50s)

Sometimes I get so mad when I listen to the radio, I want to throw it away. But we have to not lose hope. Look at Thailand, they had to fight for 30 or 40 years. (Farmer, 50s)

Journalists described how they brought out rural *"voices that could not reach the public and some of them have no power and no money"* (#2) through their in-depth reporting in rural areas. The reporters took great personal risks to report on controversial issues such as land grabbing and illegal logging, in *"any places that people suffer from land dispute or burning houses, RFA went down there to report"* (#13). Reporters also emphasized that they reported on rural people's resistance strategically and

suggested that when rural people get their experiences into the media it brings greater hope for resolution:

I think that we report on land dispute with powerful people and government officials, it will send message to government leaders. Then they will know the matters of people. So, it means that their resistance is hopeful when reported by media. If they do any action but no media reporting, it is not effective. When we report, the news will reach to authorities as well as the leaders and then they will find solution. (#6)

Media's connecting role is not just played by journalists going into land conflict areas; rural people use the media as a mouthpiece to get their message out. Going to the RFA or Daily is a strategy used frequently by community activists in land conflict areas, where local state officials are often not deemed trustworthy or helpful (and may in fact be working for the companies/political elite enacting land grabs), and NGOs may have a scarce presence. Rural activists sought to contact journalists based in Phnom Penh directly by phone, or visiting them in local towns, and asking for their help. In a focus group at an activist's house, a community struggling to regain their land after being evicted said that contacting media, as well as NGOs and opposition party members, was a key part of their resistance strategy:

Indirect assistance was in the form of getting information and sharing information with the media. For media, people contacted the Cambodia Daily, the Phnom Penh Post, Asie Serie (Radio Free Asia), Asia Knay, ASA, CNC, VoA, foreign papers and TV Apsara came and entered the area. As well as CMC a government channel covered it but the TV of the government shares only good information. The international sources like VoA and RFA share all the problems of villagers, they don't keep information like the others.

The closure of RFA/Daily was seen to mean that communities lose their access to publicity that could help with awareness of rural struggles. From the journalists' vantage point, this left a 'dark place' where 'everything is zero' (#10), rural people are "in the dark... their voice is lost" because "they don't know who can they ask for them to report all these real problems when RFA was closed" (#13). As one journalist said, this causes a loss of hope:

People are angry or disappointed after closing RFA and Cambodia Daily. They want to know about politics and want to follow up Kem Sokha's arrest, dissolution of the opposition party, and illegal logging. I think victims of land disputes are very disappointed. When they come up and there is no RFA and VOA to report, their voice would not reach to the public and find the solution for them. If there was no closing radios and they submit petition, they are more hopeful. (#8)

Journalists also felt that rural people were also reluctant to go to the media to publicise their land struggles, as they didn't know who to trust, and "they are fearful because the real source of news was shut down and they concern their safety and they are scared to speak to other reporters. They are careful to tell us". (#9) The pervasive theme that emerged in interviews was that 'the voices of land dispute communities will no longer reach the public' (#10).

### **Potential spaces for emancipatory rural politics?**

With the closure of private independent media outlets, many people see online social media as a space in which rural communities can spread information and mobilise support. This fits with global events in the past decade, such as the Arab Spring, in which new media tools like Facebook and Twitter played a central role, and a role that supported arguments that the Internet can promote greater freedoms in society and democratization (Goldsmith and Wu 2006, Weiss 2014). Facebook is an important platform for activists in the country, and prior to the 2013 election, social media played a key role in garnering support for the opposition. With cell phone ownership spreading rapidly, the

internet has become the preferred source of information for many Cambodians (although more so in urban areas). But our interviewees suggested that an optimistic view of the emancipatory potential of social media is unwarranted. The ruling party has censored and co-opted social media platforms, making it difficult and dangerous for rural people to use Facebook or other social media to communicate. This is not just a trend in Cambodia; across Southeast Asia states have restricted social media expansion through a varying mix of libel suits, censorship, moral policing and violence, and in more repressive regimes, such as Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore, people have been arrested for posting content on social media (Weiss 2014, Coca 2018). This situation does not yet approximate China's pervasive system of online monitoring and censorship through popular apps such as WeChat, but monitoring and arrest of Facebook users in Cambodia, relatively uncommon until a couple of years ago, is growing and were used to punish the opposition in the past year. As our interviewees make clear, the hope of 'cyber utopians' may well be naïve (Morozov 2011), when authoritarian regimes skilfully manipulate cyber tools to enhance their own power and control.

Journalists we interviewed were broadly sceptical of Facebook or social media filling the void left by the shuttered independent radio and newspaper. The journalists described social media as 'fake news' (#2), 'fast news' that is only half true (#5), and as one explains 'confusion news':

... but while everyone thinks that Facebook is very important, they created confusion news. When there is a lot of confusion news, it is difficult for people because they do not know which news is real and trustworthy (#4)

Another journalist noted that Facebook won't have the resources or ability to break stories or generate scoops (#1). Without some of the hallmarks of journalism—a newsroom, editors, and sources—the information on social media was not at a high enough standard to be considered 'news' for our interviewees:

I think social media has more impact because some users like the pages of government officials, the prime minister, and party pages, and then they receive information. It is just information but not news. For the media, we collect all the information and then we analyse the information to make the news (#8)

These journalists' emotive descriptions of 'confusion news' and 'just information but not news' suggest that trust is built through careful analysis of information with sources from different sides of the story, something they see missing in the 'fast', 'poisonous' social media landscape:

When the independent medias closed, it left only Facebook to help people get the news. They can know very fast. When people see something, they can take photos and post it. It is a mix of information on Facebook. Some information is fake because on the social media, some people use it to make campaigns for their party's interest. So, it is a poison environment and against the real news (#9)

If we are talking about social media, it is a mix of information. We cannot know which one is fake or real. Now this network poisons society. (#12).

Poisoning society, and a poison environment, are certainly a long way off from a 'cyber utopia'.

In the vein of the insufficient analysis presented on Facebook, another journalist cautioned that not only is the information sometimes just surface level ("face information"), the crackdowns also mean that people are limited in what they can post:

Some information on Facebook is the face information. It is not journalism. Most of the information posted on Facebook are personal issues, entertainment and meeting friends. If anyone writes critically and posts on Facebook, they are facing problems (#10)

In one rural area that we conduct research, land activists have been using Facebook to share news about land struggles, communicate with each other and publicise their struggles. But in 2016, when one of us looked up an activist friend's Facebook profile, she was longer on Facebook. When we finally reached her through a mutual friend who visited her at home, the activist said that she and others in the community network had all deleted their Facebook accounts because they had been threatened with arrest for content they posted. "*It was after [political commentator] Kem Lay was murdered*", she said, "*and there was a petition going around Facebook about it. The [government] said it was us that started it but we didn't, we just shared it*". Reporters we spoke with similarly noted that amidst the crackdown, what people are willing to post has been transformed:

If anyone does not listen to [Hun Sen], or stand up against him, then he uses a trick to arrest and put people in jail. Many people, especially politicians, local people, are scared to talk and give an opinion -- even giving an opinion on Facebook! Local people, politicians, students, they used to give opinions on Facebook. Now they are quieter because people do not dare to give their opinions on Facebook. They still do it, but they do not strongly criticize. They say things like: 'The government dissolved, it is not fair'. They don't say it strong like 'illegal'.

...[There is] not any one website that can broadcast -- so ALL, not most, ALL of website and newspaper do not dare to publish and broadcast the real situation because worried government will sue or shut down organization. They do not dare to publish. (#15)

Although its FM broadcasts have been blocked, RFA are still broadcasting via social media, and have a large following. But one downside of shifting to using social media to broadcast, as RFA have been forced to do, is that different demographics are excluded, as one reporter explained:

[Rural people] got news from listening to radios. They don't have smartphones to use. Old people are uneducated because our country had civil war. So they don't have knowledge about technology or how to use the internet (#7).

In addition to potentially bypassing the elderly and those with less formal education (which is a sizable part of the population outside of cities), journalists were hesitant that rural people would have the means to access the news on smartphones. As another reporter summarized,

Before, rural people can learn from RFA, but now it is shut down and they have to turn to website and to Facebook. But local people don't have money for a smartphone. Nearly half the population no longer have a way to get the real information—everything is cut. ... Only NGOs can help now (#15)

When we asked reporters about what spaces were emerging for emancipatory rural politics in the wake of the crackdown, they were pessimistic. One argued that new, independent media outlets had to emerge, but "*till now I don't see any media organization to fill the gap left by the Daily and RFA and I can say that in next five years it will have no medias to replace them*" (#5). The problem, as another reporter noted, is that "*any new outlet is going to take time to build trust and to form. Right now, nothing fills this gap*" (#6), and one reporter with 16 years' experience thought it will take at least 5 years for something to emerge to fill the gap left by *the Daily* & RFA (#12).

The ruling party are rushing to co-opt and to fill any gaps of their making, especially via social media platforms where they bolster the image of individuals and the party -- going as far as sharing photos of quotidian activities like going to the gym. The number of 'likes' on Hun Sen's Facebook page totals over 9 million, although the Phnom Penh Post alleges that most come from paid 'click farms' abroad (Nass and Turton 2016). Starting around September 2015, Hun Sen stepped up his social media activity to show another side of Hun Sen (Tomiyama 2016), posting regular pictures of himself attending formal functions alongside personal scenes of him with family, cleaning a local park, eating noodles with people on the street. The captioning of such photographs emphasized their everydayness, such as one stating "grandchildren gathered for my April 4 birthday and helped me blow out candles



on the birthday cake” (reported in Tomiyama, 2017). Hun Sen also regularly streams events and speeches live on Facebook, and has even gone as far as creating his own mobile app (Khoun 2016). This also carries over to the rank and file of the party, who Hun Sen has encouraged to use social media.

### **Looking Forward:**

As we write this working paper, the situation in Cambodia is still in flux. In February 2018, the National Assembly passed Thai-style *lèse majesté* laws that forbid insults to the monarchy, along with a series of vague changes to the Cambodian Constitution, including a change that would allow the permanent removal of voting rights for convicted felons (Boyle 2018). We won't know until the July 2018 elections and its aftermath what these past months of radically redrawing the Cambodian political landscape may mean. Perhaps tellingly, in a Senate election in February 2018 the CPP won every seat. No one we spoke with is sure whether this is a short-term crackdown prior to the 2018 election, or whether this signals a longer-term shift to a 'new normal' of naked authoritarianism. What we do know is that the deepening of authoritarian rule has ongoing implications for rural struggles. What is happening is truly bad. However, there are many, many rural activists distributed throughout the Cambodian countryside. These activists, and their networks of engaged smallholding farmers, have been creative, resilient, and have stood the test of time, which has always involved challenges to their organizing—challenges that have sometimes been viciously violent. It is important that these actors are not dismissed in narratives that depict Cambodia as inevitably headed to an authoritarian state with no political spaces to manoeuvre. Research will be needed that brings attention to how these actors reassemble and re-shape their strategies.

This case of shifting forms of authoritarianism in Cambodia reminds us that behind populist appeals of authoritarian leaders lies the potential for violent repression. What we see in Cambodia currently is in one sense the failure of authoritarian populism. A populism based on personalised 'gifts' of government services funded by networks of politico-business elite has the fatal flaw of requiring ever greater levels of resource extraction, corruption and nepotism, for the elite who fund the political 'gifts' must themselves be paid in official titles and resource extraction licenses. The government's support has broken down as the population grows tired of land grabbing, corruption and inequality (Milne *et al.* 2015). When people expressed their appetite for change at the polls in the 2013 and 2017 elections, the ruling party reacted by closing down political space, enacting a series of manoeuvres including legal reforms, threats, media surveillance and criminalisation of activists, that paved the way for the dissolution of the opposition party and a turn to a deeper form of authoritarian rule. Now there are no votes to buy since there is no one else to vote for.

But this deeper authoritarian rule still seeks public legitimation. We see a shift to new forms of urban populism in the government's co-optation of social media space, and the renewed anti-Western nationalist rhetoric used to justify the political crackdown. The ruling party is also campaigning on many of the same policy promises made by the opposition party prior to the last election. But these policies, which include a wage hike for garment workers and government officials, do not touch the issue of rural land struggles. Now, as the journalists we interviewed said, the crackdown on media and opposition politics threatens to leave rural people 'in the dark'. With the loss of independent media in rural areas comes a loss of accountability, a loss of rural people's voice, and a loss of hope for rural social movements. The Cambodian voices we hear in this paper illustrate another dimension of loss. These Cambodian journalists' rich accounts of the forces reshaping their country are no longer on the front pages of newspapers in offices and road side stalls, their voices no longer heard by rural farmers who listen to the radio news "as if it were music" (#13).

As a recent university graduate wrote on his blog as a testimony to *the Daily*:

It was you who kept me and other countless Cambodians, who are sick and tired of hearing overpraised statements and one-sided commentary broadcasted on TV, informed about what is

really happening in this Kingdom of Endless Wonders. It was you who alerted my Facebook newsfeed when Dr. Kem Ley was shot in broad daylight. It was you who gave chances to countless young Cambodian students like me and others to share our opinions on issues facing this country. It was you who pushed me to step up and exercise my civic rights and express my thoughts to the press. It was you who made me believe that I no longer need to be an expert, a minister or a CEO to have my [voice] heard. And now, it is you again who leave me.

...For the last time, allow me to thank you for what you have done over your past 24 years of operation in this country. I want to thank you for your insightful stories and informations that keep people like me informed and unblind about what the rich and powerful have done at the expense of ordinary Cambodians. I want to thank you for crossing the line, confront[ing] the tyrant, and say[ing] what should be said about the way things work in this country. I want to thank you for enlightening my immature understanding of how a democracy works. You have been at the heart of this UNTAC-sponsored, hopeless and soon-to-be-diminished democracy. (KhmaoBlog 2017)

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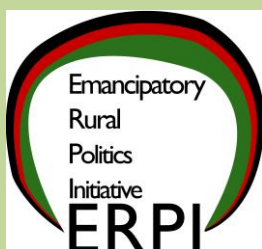
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