

FREEDOM ON THE NET 2017

Cambodia

48
/100

PARTLY FREE

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	12 /25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	20 /35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	16 /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

48 /100 ● **Partly Free**

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the [research methodology](#) and [report acknowledgements](#).



Key Developments June 2016 - May 2017

- Access improved, and some people were more likely to consult the internet for news than the government-controlled traditional media (see Key Access Indicators and Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).
- Personal information was leaked to discredit senior politicians from both the ruling party and the opposition (Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).
- Two opposition politicians were sentenced to prison for Facebook posts, their immunity from prosecution rescinded because the content remained available online (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activity).
- Hackers attacked email and social media accounts operated by activists and journalists (see Technical Attacks).

Introduction

Internet freedom deteriorated in 2017, with prison sentences and new arrests for online speech and technical attacks on activists and journalists. The decline was offset by steadily improving internet penetration.

Criminal charges in relation to Facebook posts, relatively uncommon just two years ago, appear to be increasing in advance of 2018 elections and were used to punish the political opposition. The opposition had made gains in 2013 elections following their embrace of digital tools, though they failed to unseat long-serving Prime Minister Hun Sen. ¹ Lengthy sentences passed during the reporting period signaled a shrinking space for online speech.

The year saw an unprecedented number of politicized leaks targeting public figures. Insinuations about policy, political affiliations, and personal scandals helped to discredit figures representing both the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). Overall, the CNRP fared worse, with leaked information factoring into some high profile prosecutions.

Though under pressure, the internet has become the preferred source of information for many Cambodians, according in one survey from the past year. Even as pressure on civil society ramped up, Cambodians continued to use social media for activism.

A. Obstacles to Access

Increasing smartphone penetration has enabled a greater number of Cambodians to access the internet regularly. As in past years, the impact remains concentrated in urban areas.

Availability and Ease of Access

Internet usage in Cambodia has soared in the past four years, and continued to improve during the reporting period (see Key Access Indicators). Some obstacles to access remain, particularly outside cities. **2**

In December 2016, the Open Institute reported that 96 percent of Cambodians own a mobile phone, though Cambodians living in urban areas are considerably more likely to have internet access on their phones than those in rural areas. **3** Smartphone penetration amongst Cambodians aged 15 to 65 was at 48 percent, a 21 percent increase from the previous year, according to the report. Men were more likely to own a smartphone than women (54 percent vs 41 percent); however, this gap is narrowing, the report found.

Devices capable of Khmer language communication make it easier for Cambodians to connect. The number of Cambodians who own phones that support Khmer script climbed to 76 percent, up from 63 percent in 2015. **4**

Internet service is becoming more affordable over time. A sample 4 GB mobile data connection cost US\$5 a month in 2017, and fixed-line connections cost at least US\$12 a month, **5** compared to an average monthly income of just under US\$300. **6** Some data packages were heavily discounted (see ICT Market).

Restrictions on Connectivity

No government shutdowns of internet or mobile access have been documented in Cambodia, although the National Election Committee attempted to ban SMS nationwide in advance of a 2007 election under a law prohibiting campaigning immediately before a vote. **7**

Internet usage has been constrained by poor infrastructure. The absence of an extensive landline network inhibits greater internet penetration, since the fixed landlines which broadband internet services depend on are often unavailable in rural areas. ISPs develop their own infrastructure. By 2016, three had announced plans to construct submarine fiber-optic internet cables to connect to high-speed international connections; one of the projects was commissioned by the government. **8** One of these projects, the Malaysia-Cambodia-Thailand (MCT) submarine cable, was launched in March 2017 to provide high-speed internet access to provinces with slow connections and improve 4G services nationwide. **9** The 1,300 km long fiber-optic cable system, which has a capacity of 30 Tbps, connects Cambodia to landing stations in Malaysia and Thailand.

Three operators provide a backbone network, Telecom Cambodia, Viettel Cambodia, and Cambodia Fiber Optica Cable Network. **10** These operators interconnect with smaller networks, allowing exchanges of information through Wi-Fi, LAN lines, or other means. Telecom Cambodia operates under the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications of Cambodia (MPTC) and the Ministry of Finance. **11**

Insufficient electricity, often resulting in nationwide blackouts, imposes additional constraints on computer and internet use. Connections can also be extremely slow, especially in remote areas.

Critics say poorly defined provisions of a telecommunications law passed in 2015 leaves it open to abuse to interrupt service. Under Article 7, the MPTC or other relevant ministries will have the authority to order telecommunications providers to “take necessary measures” in undefined circumstances of *force majeure*. The law separately established an enforcement body of “telecommunications inspection officials” to police offenses under the law, with the authority to call in support from the armed forces. **12** These officials “hold power to temporarily suspend telecoms firms’ services and suspend or fire their staff,” according to local NGO LICADHO. **13**

In November 2016, news reports said officials had threatened to punish service providers or disconnect unregistered mobile phone numbers under a regulation which restricts anonymous communication (see Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity). No implementation was reported.

ICT Market

The telecommunications market is becoming increasingly competitive since it opened to private investment in 2006. ¹⁴ In 2016, the Telecommunications Regulator of Cambodia reported 31 ISPs and 7 mobile service providers operating in Cambodia, a decrease since 2014 following some consolidation. ¹⁵

In February 2017, the regulator warned mobile operators not to engage in a price war. ¹⁶ The rivalry between the six prominent mobile operators Smart, CamGSM, Viettel, Seatel, Xinwei, and Cadcomms, developed into a race to satisfy the growing market for internet consumption at the lowest possible cost, potentially creating a challenge for new operators seeking to enter the market. In January 2017, CamGSM, the operator of Cellcard, promoted a discount to its customers offering \$1 for \$100 worth of mobile services; in response Smart launched a promotional package of \$1 in exchange for \$125 worth of mobile service including data, calls and messaging. ¹⁷ TRC spokesperson Im Vutha noted that whilst low costs appeal to consumers, it was important to balance profit and long-term sustainability. ¹⁸

The 2015 telecommunications law introduced penalties for constructing or operating telecommunications without a license, including fines and prison sentences of up to three years. ¹⁹

Regulatory Bodies

The Telecommunications Regulator of Cambodia (TRC), established by royal decree on 20 September 2012, is the main regulatory body in Cambodia. The TRC's objectives are to regulate the operations of telecommunications networks and services, in order to “promote fair, efficient, and transparent competition” in Cambodia. ²⁰ Although the TRC proclaims itself to be an autonomous public entity,

the 2015 telecommunications law significantly undermined its independence by granting the MPTC ultimate authority over the regulator, without transparency. **21**

B. Limits on Content

The internet, and particularly social media, is increasingly trusted as an alternative to state and state affiliate-run news outlets. It is also used for campaigns challenging human rights abuses and online activism. But prosecutions for online activity may encourage self-censorship, and there are signs of nascent content manipulation campaigns.

Blocking and Filtering

Websites hosting pornography or sexually explicit images are subject to blocking in Cambodia. The prohibition is governed by Articles 38 and 39 of the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation. **22**

Politically-motivated blocking has not yet been systematically applied, although it has been observed on a case by case basis. Blogs blocked for supporting the political opposition, such as *KI Media* and *Khmerization*, were available through at least some ISPs during the coverage period, indicating that censorship orders are unevenly executed.

Implementation of censorship is nontransparent, apparently based on informal communications between government officials and service providers, which provide no avenue for appeal. In 2011, for example, then-Minister of Posts and Telecommunications So Khun asked mobile phone operators to “cooperate” in blocking websites “that affect Khmer morality and tradition and the government,” according to *The Phnom Penh Post*, citing internal MPTC minutes. **23**

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, were freely available in 2017 and were an important source of news for many consumers (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).

Content Removal

The extent of content removal remains difficult to assess, as the process is unofficial and nontransparent. No significant acts of content removal were recorded during the coverage period, though some content may have been removed following government warnings or user complaints.

In July 2016, for example, a social media outcry led to the banning of two songs that could be interpreted sexually. The Ministry of Information issued a statement calling on media outlets to “avoid social negativity through the dissemination of these two songs.” ²⁴

In December 2016, The Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA), said it was seeking “possible approaches” to prevent the “uploading and circulating of negative images of women on social media,” though no legislation had been introduced in mid-2017. ²⁵ This announcement came after news reports said the Ministry of Culture had summoned popular star Denny Kwan to “educate” her about appropriate dress after a photograph of her in revealing clothing sparked public debate when it was shared on Facebook. ²⁶

Media, Diversity and Content Manipulation

The internet has quickly become one of the main sources of news and information, and social media has liberated many Cambodians from an environment in which information was dominated by government influence. ²⁷ Yet that liberation looked increasingly fragile during the reporting period.

A campaign against the political opposition in advance of 2018 elections may increase self-censorship online. The main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) advised members to avoid expressing overly strong criticism of the government after several were arrested for online speech (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities). ²⁸ Some members were explicitly warned in relation to their posts. In March 2017, following the death of Deputy Prime Minister Sok An, Council of Ministers spokesman Phay Siphon warned Facebook users not to insult his memory and threatened one individual with legal action in relation to comments about the politician. ²⁹ The individual apologized on Facebook. Separately, a private phone conversation between CNRP members Lim Kim Ya and Hing Yoeun that purported to

document them insulting Sok An was leaked on an anonymously operated Facebook page. Both subsequently apologized. ³⁰

Press freedom also declined in 2017 amid a “clampdown on independent media,” according to international observers. ³¹ Both independent and government-controlled media organizations have a strong online presence. Non-government-controlled websites are not restricted in the same way as those operated by state media, but may be subject to threats and legal action. In March 2017, a Council of Ministers spokesman cited U.S. President Donald Trump when threatening to “crush” media outlets that compromised national “peace and stability.” ³² The Prime Minister echoed the sentiment, stating that he and Trump both see the media as stirring anarchy. ³³

A corresponding clampdown on civil society also bodes ill for freedom of expression on the internet. In mid-2016, Justice Ministry officials warned one NGO, LICADHO, that their webpage titled “Cambodia’s Political Prisoners” contravened Article 24 of the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations requiring political neutrality, and could lead to the dissolution of the organization or criminal charges. ³⁴ The trend was starkly illustrated when human rights activist and political commentator Kem Ley was murdered in July 2016 after commenting publicly on allegations of government corruption. ³⁵ His associates told the *Cambodia Daily* that Kem Ley had taught them to “remain independent,” but also to “be careful with [their] wording.” ³⁶ Prime Minister Hun Sen threatened Kem Ley’s colleague, Meas Ny, not to “go too far” in February 2017 after he said actions taken against the CNRP were unconstitutional. ³⁷ In March 2017, the Prime Minister also threatened all non-government organizations (NGOs) that engage in “political analysis” with possible imprisonment. ³⁸ The warning was issued after the head of the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia published a Facebook post alleging the incumbent administration was working to unfairly discredit the opposition.

Yet the internet also offered a platform to document and resist these developments. In a significant development, the internet, and especially Facebook, overtook radio, television, and newspapers, as the most popular place to seek news, according to one Open Institute survey. ³⁹ The survey found 30 percent of respondents accessed

information through the internet and Facebook, compared to 29 percent who watched television, and 15 percent who listened to the radio. The director of the Cambodian Institute for Media Studies, Moeun Chhean Narridh, hailed the “democratization” of news via social media in December 2016. **40**

Following the murder of political analyst Kem Ley, for example, international and civil society media outlets streamed his funeral procession live, and there was widespread coverage on Facebook. State-run media outlets were criticized for failing to adequately cover the event, after the Information Ministry warned them against broadcasting “images and content relating to murder.” **41**

Prime Minister Hun Sen embraces social media and live streams events and speeches on Facebook. **42** The prime minister’s belief that the internet has brought him closer to the Cambodian people has even driven him to create his own mobile application and encourage social media use amongst civil servants. **43**

This activity has raised questions about government regulation and manipulation of online content. The prime minister’s Facebook page has over seven million “likes,” though *The Phnom Penh Post* alleged that only 20 percent of new “likes” in February and March 2016 came from within the country, with the rest reportedly coming from paid “click farms” abroad. **44** In November 2016, former opposition leader Sam Rainsy was found guilty of defamation for claiming that the “likes” were not genuine (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities). **45**

<https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/rainsy-guilty-hun-sen-facebook-likes...>

Allegations of paid content manipulation were made during the coverage period involving an online activist and social media celebrity, Thy Sovantha. **46** The self-professed CNRP supporter, who has over two million followers on Facebook, undertook a political U-turn to conduct a high profile online campaigns alongside ruling party activists. News reports said she had been offered money through her Facebook page by a man who identified himself as “grandpa” and appeared to have connections with the ruling party. **47** Sovantha, one of the most polarizing non-elected political figures in Cambodia, exemplifies the way social media is increasingly used in Cambodian politics. **48**

The coverage period saw a deluge of leaks involving private digital communications published online to discredit political opponents. The ruling party were also targeted, but the CNRP was most affected, undermining the already vulnerable party by providing grounds for criminal prosecution. In one example, Cambodia's Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU) aggressively investigated leaked recordings in which opposition leader Kem Sokha appeared to offer gifts to his mistress in early 2016. Five people affiliated with an NGO were subsequently charged with bribing a witness in the case and were imprisoned without trial for over a year before being released on bail in June 2017, in what international human rights organizations characterized as politically-motivated detentions. ⁴⁹ By contrast, the ACU declined to investigate scandals implicating the ruling party.

Anonymously operated accounts were the source of many compromising leaks. For example, in February 2017, the progovernment online media outlet *Fresh News* published leaks obtained from a Facebook page, "Sei Ha." The leaks allegedly revealed messages and recordings entangling CNRP officials, including leader Sam Rainsy, in infidelity and scandal. ⁵⁰ Observers characterized Sei Ha as an anonymous outlet created to disseminate government propaganda. ⁵¹

Whilst social media enables a diversity of information sources, the information distributed is not always well-informed. In January 2017, a story which stated canned fruits from Thailand were contaminated with HIV went viral on Facebook. The Thai Embassy had to issue a statement confirming that the story was not true. ⁵²

Digital Activism

Social media provides a significant outlet for citizens to express dissatisfaction. During the coverage period, online campaigns were launched on human rights and political issues, achieving some visibility, though not enough to result in significant change.

The #FREETH5KH (Free the Khmer Five) online campaign was launched in August 2016 in support of the five people detained for supposedly bribing a witness in a trial involving opposition leader Kem Sokha's alleged extra-marital affair (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation). ⁵³ The campaign was designed to remind the

detainees, who had been jailed since April, that they were not forgotten, and call for their release. #FREETH5KH attracted several thousand supporters on Facebook and ran an active twitter campaign. In April 2017, marking the one year anniversary of their detention, the “I am the Five” photo campaign encouraged people all over the world to take photographs with the faces of the five and post them on social media. The five were released on bail in June 2017, but charges remained pending.

A grassroots Black Monday campaign developed out of the support for the imprisoned activists. Individuals posted photos of themselves wearing black on Mondays to mourn the deterioration of human rights in Cambodia. ⁵⁴ The Black Monday protests were covered in the documentary film, “A Cambodian Spring.” ⁵⁵

Violation of User Rights

Cambodian law guarantees the right to freedom of expression but the criminal code has been used against those who speak out against the government, and opposition politicians were jailed for online speech. Technical attacks apparently seeking to expose private data have become a frequent occurrence.

Legal Environment

Article 31 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia incorporates international human rights standards into national law, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), ⁵⁶ and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). ⁵⁷ The right to freedom of expression and opinion is embodied in those treaties. Article 41 of the Constitution of Cambodia provides that “Khmer citizens shall have freedom of expression” as long as it does not “infringe upon the honor of others” or disrupt “society, public order and national security.” ⁵⁸ Media outlets who report on human rights have been accused of threatening national security.

Provisions of Cambodia law, notably provisions of the Criminal Code of the Kingdom of Cambodia, ⁵⁹ threaten the right to freedom of expression. Individuals can be arrested for disturbing public order or affecting the dignity of individuals and public officials. ⁶⁰ Articles 305 and 307, which govern defamation, are frequently implemented, causing particular concern in light of the volume of politicized leaks

involving private digital conversations in 2016 and 2017. The law covers insults which are “circulated in public or exposed to the sight of the public,” meaning individuals be charged even if they did not consent or intend to publish. ⁶¹ Both Articles 305 and 307 carry fines of KHR 10,000,000 (US\$2,500). Article 306 states that defamation through media is governed by the 1995 Law on the Press. Article 10 of the Press Law governs defamation, which carries a fine of KHR 1, 000, 000 to 5, 000, 000 (US\$250-1,200) and requires publication of a retraction. ⁶²

Though those charges do not carry prison sentences, people were also convicted of other criminal charges in relation to political Facebook posts during the coverage period (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities). These include forgery, which carries penalties up to 10 years in prison under Article 629 of the criminal code, and incitement to disturb social security or discriminate against a person or group, under Articles 495 and 496, which carry maximum two and three year prison penalties, respectively.

The 2015 Law on Telecommunications increased government control over the sector and threatens the rights to privacy and freedom of expression (see Restrictions on Connectivity and Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity). Using telecommunications to plan criminal activity or damage property carries a possible prison sentence of up to six months and fines of up to KHR 40 million (US\$8,800) under Articles 93–96. Article 80 punishes the “establishment, installation and utilization of equipment in the telecommunications sector” leading to “national insecurity” with 7 to 15 years in prison. Critics feared the heavy penalties attached to this vaguely defined clause could be abused to prosecute legitimate activity. However, other parts of the law have been commended as an important step towards increasing connectivity in Cambodia and encouraging e-education. ⁶³

In mid-2017, a proposed cybercrime law appeared to have been put on hold. In 2012, the government announced its intention to adopt a law to regulate online content and to prevent “ill-willed” individuals from spreading false information. A problematic draft leaked in 2014, though the government refused to release an official version. In 2015, the drafting process appeared to be ongoing, ⁶⁴ but there were no developments during the reporting period.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Prosecutions involving opposition party members and civilians increased in 2016 and 2017 as the government cracked down on the political opposition (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation). Though exact figures were not available, several charges of defamation, forgery, and incitement to disturb social society or discriminate against others were brought in relation to content posted online in the past year. At least one opposition activist reportedly fled the country to evade charges in relation to content posted on a Facebook page he administered. In March 2017, the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), a body of legislators from the region, warned that criminal trials over alleged defamation had become “prevalent and normalized.” ⁶⁵

At least two opposition politicians were sentenced to prison based on Facebook posts involving the border with Vietnam, although senators and members of the National Assembly are immune to prosecution under the constitution. The disputed border is the center of a long-running controversy, with the opposition claiming that the ruling party knowingly ceded territory to Vietnam.

- In October 2016, CNRP lawmaker Um Sam An was imprisoned for two and a half years for comments he made about the border on Facebook, which were considered to constitute incitement. The prosecution successfully argued that because the post remained available online, he was caught committing the crime (*in flagrante delicto*), which rescinds his immunity as a National Assembly member. ⁶⁶
- On November 8, Senator Hong Sok Hour was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment. ⁶⁷ He was charged with forgery and incitement for posting an altered version of a 1979 border treaty between Cambodia and Vietnam to the Facebook page of CNRP President Sam Rainsy. ⁶⁸

Sam Rainsy, the former opposition leader who lives overseas, was convicted at least three times in absentia during the coverage period of this report, and charged with additional offences involving online speech. ⁶⁹ Rainsy went abroad after the Phnom Penh Municipal Court issued a warrant for his arrest in November 2015 in relation to charges of defamation and incitement that date back to 2008. On August 1, 2016,

Prime Minister Hun Sen charged Rainsy for Facebook posts accusing the government of responsibility for the death of political analyst Kem Ley (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation). ⁷⁰ He was then investigated for alleged incitement over a September Skype conversation in which he asked CNRP youth activists whether they were ready to join a “mass demonstration.” ⁷¹ On November 8, Rainsy was found guilty of defamation in relation to statements about Prime Minister Hun Sen’s Facebook supporters (see Media, Diversity and Content Manipulation). ⁷² On December 27, he was convicted of forgery and incitement charges as an accomplice of Senator Hong Sok Hour, and sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. In January 2017, Prime Minister Hun Sen and social media personality Thy Sovantha brought fresh charges against him for publishing comments alleging the leader was paying the 21-year-old to support him online (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).

⁷³

Oun Vansak, opposition party activist and manager of the *I Love Cambodia Hot News* // Facebook page, was summoned to court over a charge of “incitement to discriminate” for content posted online between 2013 and 2016. ⁷⁴ In February 2017, news reports said he had left the country to avoid imprisonment. ⁷⁵

Other internet users were serving sentences handed down in the past. CNRP activists Sok Sam Ean and Norng Sarith completed 18-month sentences for forgery in May 2017. ⁷⁶ They were convicted for posting on Facebook an image of a public document that suggested Cambodian territory had been lost. ⁷⁷ Two more Facebook users were arrested on forgery charges in the reporting period, for allegedly posting fake documents on a Facebook account parading as the prime minister’s. News reports did not elaborate on the nature of the content. ⁷⁸ Student Kong Raya was released on February 23, 2017. ⁷⁹ He had served an 18 month prison sentence for incitement to commit a crime in relation to a Facebook post calling for a color revolution, which observers said was not even influential. ⁸⁰

As in 2016, some of the comments that were subject to prosecution during the coverage period involved violent threats. In February 2017, 27-year-old Ven Sopheap was imprisoned for two years for threatening Prime Minister Hun Sen in a Facebook post. It was reported that he posted an online video of an effigy which appeared to

represent Hun Sen, titled, “Hun Sen, today is the day of your death.” Human rights advocates said the verdict was an “attempt to smother freedom of expression in anticipation of upcoming commune elections.” ⁸¹

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Surveillance of citizens’ digital activity has not been technologically advanced in Cambodia, though there are few safeguards to prevent abuse.

The 2015 telecommunications law includes several provisions that undermine security and privacy. ⁸² Article 6 of the telecommunications law requires that “All telecommunications operators and persons involved with the telecommunications sector shall provide to the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications the telecommunications information and communication technology service data.” There is no requirement for a judicial warrant or other safeguard, and the law places no limits on how long data can be stored. ⁸³ Article 97 criminalizes eavesdropping by private individuals, but permits secret surveillance with approval from an undefined “legitimate authority.” The law includes no legal or procedural safeguards, and as such, appears to authorize undeclared monitoring of “any private speech via telecommunications,” according to one analysis. ⁸⁴

The provision against eavesdropping has yet to be applied in relation to the politicized online leaks of private conversations in 2016 and 2017 (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation). Several political figures, particularly in the opposition, have been subject to smear campaigns following leaks that implicated them in wrongdoing, but in many cases the content is unverified, and it is unclear if any were obtained through eavesdropping or illegitimate surveillance. Some methods involved in the leaks are low tech, especially ones that appeared to support the opposition. In November 2016, a YouTube user alleged Hun Sen’s son, Hun Manith, and social media supporter Thy Sovantha, were discussing plans for a campaign against opposition leader Kem Sokha. The user documented the allegations by filming the screen of a phone that appeared to reveal the two of them exchanging messages.

In early 2017, the Prime Minister claimed to have a private recording of an interview between a *Phnom Penh Post* journalist and a CNRP source. According to the *Phnom*

Penh Post, the audio was recorded on the reporter's personal device and not shared with anyone else. Government spokesman Phay Siphon denied that the state monitors journalists. ⁸⁵

There are some limits on anonymous communication. The authorities initiated a crackdown on retailers who failed to register SIM card owners in 2017. ⁸⁶ A 2015 Regulation on Cell Phone Data threatens suspensions and fines for mobile operators who do not register the identities of consumers. ⁸⁷ The regulation obliges companies to supply police with identification details of SIM card holders on request. ⁸⁸ TRC spokesman Im Vutha said that SIM card registration would enable the government to monitor telecom operators' databases. ⁸⁹ The punishment for noncompliant operators remains unclear, and enforcement stagnated for a period, but observers characterized the renewed crackdown on unregistered SIM cards as evidence that officials were seeking to monitor civilians and erode civil liberties. ⁹⁰ The TRC had previously ordered mobile phone operators and ISPs to cooperate with police in 2014. ⁹¹ In 2012, a circular from the Ministry of Interior and the MPTC ordered internet cafes to install surveillance cameras, though it's not clear if many complied. ⁹²

In March 2017, the Ministry of the Interior announced a new ID initiative to start in 2019. ⁹³ The system, which will assign every Cambodian with a 10-digit ID number for life, will be used to support financial transactions, but critics said databases containing the numbers and related information would be vulnerable to hacking.

Intimidation and Violence

Journalists and activists face periodic violence in Cambodia, and the murder of activist Kem Ley during the reporting period underscored the risks attached to political expression (see Media, Diversity and Content Manipulation). There were no examples of similar violence in direct reprisal for online speech, though officials frequently used the threat of criminal charges to intimidate their critics.

Violent threats are also issued online. In the midst of the campaign against opposition leader Kem Sokha, a social media account owned by Thy Sovantha posted images of firearms that appeared to threaten him, though she said the account had been

hacked. ⁹⁴ While there was no investigation in that case, threats against Prime Minister Hun Sen resulted in prosecution (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).

Technical Attacks

There have been intermittent reports of technical attacks on different targets across the coverage period. In April 2017, there was a surge of attacks on email and social media accounts operated by opposition lawmakers, activists, and journalists. Activist monk Loun Sovath had his Facebook and email accounts hacked after he received a phishing message asking him to reset his password. ⁹⁵

Institutions and government officials were also targeted. The Facebook page of the Apsara Authority, which manages the Angkor Wat temple, was hacked in February 2017. The attackers posted rumors about Hun Sen’s family on the page, eliciting widespread engagement. ⁹⁶ Prime Minister Hun Sen was separately attacked in a protest when the international hacking group Anonymous posted pictures of government forces beating protesters his personal website in mid-2016. ⁹⁷

In January 2017, the National Election Committee reported that the new national voter list was hacked by an entity overseas. ⁹⁸ The voter list, which was created to re-register voters late last year, was taken offline when security was compromised. ⁹⁹ A video released online in April appeared to show manipulation of voter information in the official database, but an NEC spokesman said no data had been tampered with. ¹⁰⁰

C. Violations of User Rights

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Footnotes

- ¹ Freedom House, “Cambodia,” in Freedom on the Net 2014, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2014/cambodia>.
- ² Erin Handley, ‘Facebook trumps TV’ The Phnom Penh Post, 16 December 2016 <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/facebook-trumps-tv>. Kimchhoy Phong, Lihol Srou, and Javier Solá, “Mobile Phones and Internet Use in Cambodia 2016,” Open Institute,

USAID Development Innovations, Asia Foundation, December 2016, <http://asiafoundation.org/publication/mobile-phones-internet-use-cambod...>

- 3 Kimchhoy Phong, Lihol Srou and Javier Solá, 'Mobile Phones and Internet Use in Cambodia 2016.'
- 4 Kimchhoy Phong and Javier Sola, "Mobile Phones and Internet in Cambodia 2015," The Asia Foundation, November 30, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1NlsZ9T>.
- 5 Smart, <https://www.smart.com.kh/plans/data>; Opennet, <http://opennet.com.kh/news/adsl/adsl-home-premium-for-phnompenh/>

More footnotes 



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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

23/100  **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

44/100  **Partly Free**

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