



Political participation in post-authoritarian regimes in the digital age: insights from Cambodia

2022 Cambodia ICT Camp

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Dr Marc Pinol Rovira

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Democracy; democratisation; digital media;
civil society

Former Research Fellow, Cambodian Institute
for Cooperation and Peace (CICP)

2013

2017

What are you afraid of?



“Self-censorship has permeated and is omnipresent in all facets of society in the Kingdom of Cambodia. This phenomenon is the culmination and solidification of fear from persecution and incarceration that has been occurring in the nation for the past 40 years. Propelled by repressive legislation, surveillance, arrests and investigations, Cambodians are increasingly paranoid when expressing critical political opinion” (Gomez, 2021, n.p)

Outline

Fear from politics is a key factor defining non-traditional political participation in the digital age in Cambodia

- **Context:** why digital democracy matters
- **My research:** tracing digital media in use to engage in governance practices – through fear
- **Findings:** why fear strengthens and harms governance in the digital age
- **Conclusions:** three key take home ideas and hints for future research
- **Collaborative task and discussion**

Context: the digital democracy debate



60% of the world citizens are internet users

53% in Cambodia

67 % use smartphones

125% in Cambodia

54% have social media accounts

71% in Cambodia

(Kemp, 2021)

- The internet has changed the nature of many day-to-day tasks, including political engagement
 - Digital democracy (Norris, 2010)
 - A wide range of actors and processes
- The great debate: do digital media strengthen or harm democracy? How so?
 - Global south and post-authoritarian regimes
 - Qualitative: why does digital media change political participation

My research (i)

WHAT

Identifies key **contextual** elements in governance

Analyses how they **intersect** with people's use of digital media

Shapes political participation



HOW

Qualitative investigation:

53 interviews with civil society actors



CONTRIBUTIONS

Explain **why** digital democracy matters (not only **that** it matters)

Complements quantitative studies
(Saud and Margono, 2021; Sinpeng 2021)

Complements global north literature on digital governance (Lee, 2017)

Table 1 - Sample of the study

Total number of informants: 53 (100%)

Everyday citizens: 24 (45%)

- **12 (50%) male and 12 (50%) female**
- **14 (58%) junior and 10 (42%) senior**
- **8 (37%) low formal education and 16 (64%) higher education**

Civil society organisations: 29 (55%)

- 13 (45%) NGO/INGO workers
 - 6 (21%) grassroots leaders, activists, and influencers
 - 3 (10%) media representatives
 - 2 (7%) think tanks representatives
 - 2 (7%) political analysts
 - 2 (7%) academics and representatives of the education sector,
 - 1 (3%) board member of an opposition party
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My research (ii)

Democracy

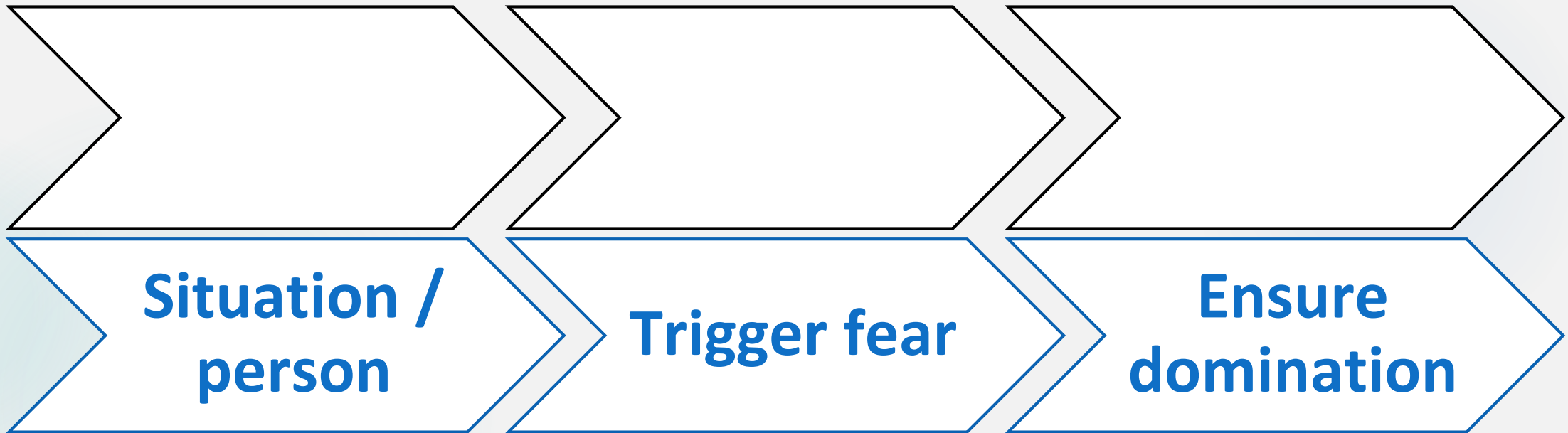
- **A model of governance**
 - *Representation*
 - *Political liberties*
- **State and non-state actors**
- **Participation**
 - *Traditional (procedural or **thin**)*
 - *Non-traditional (substantive or **thick**)*
- **The thin-thick approach**

Digital media

- **Digital democracy**
- **Supporters**
 - “Liberation technology” to fix the democratic ills
- **Detractors**
 - Highlighting the challenges of digital democracy

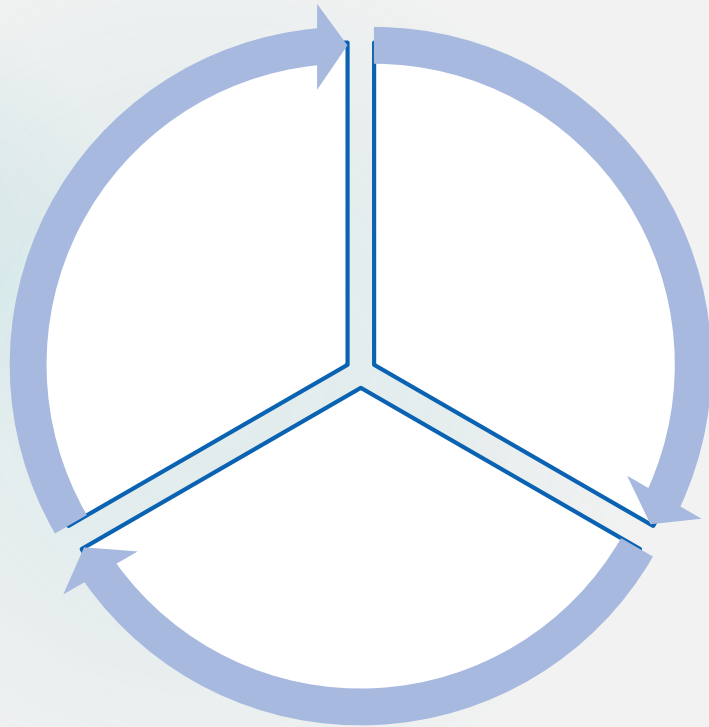
My research (iii)

Political fear



Key findings (i)

Digital media **can reduce people's fear** of engaging in non-traditional politics, strengthening democratic governance



(Alves, 1990)

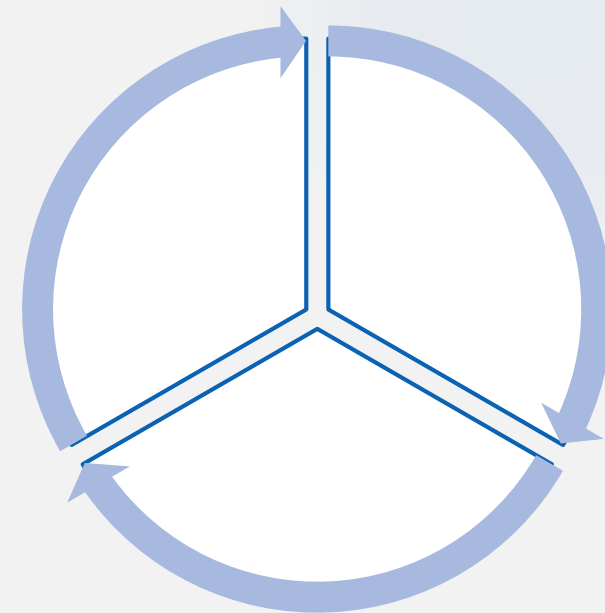
A climate of political fear results in a **negative link** between the state and non-state sectors:

- Less **participation**
- Limited opportunities to accept/reject authority (**legitimisation**)
- Poor of socio-political **integration**
- **Imbalance** of power (Muller, 2006)

Key findings (i)

Evidence suggests that civil society used digital media to **start reducing** their political fear in the early 2010s – in the context of the national elections of 2013

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MEDIA
Increased awareness
Interaction; networks; increased trust
Speak out
Outcome: reduced fear



Key findings (i): implications

- **Less fear** → **increased non-traditional political participation** → **improved relationship government-civil society** → **stronger democracy**
 - Civil society is better **integrated** in the political sphere
 - Non-traditional participation complements voting – new opportunities to **legitimise** authority
 - Relative **rebalance of power**
 - **Thin-thick democracy**

Key findings (ii)

During the political crackdown of 2017, the the Government used **digital media to induce fear**, shrinking the public sphere and harming democracy



Key findings (ii)

Access to information

-
-
-
-



Networks

-
-
-
-
-
-



Silence

-
-

Key findings (ii): implications

- **Less opportunities to form publics**
 - *Less deliberation, negatively impacting how people form new ideas*
- **Civil society is poorly integrated in the public sphere**
 - *Civil society's ideas become less relevant in shaping public institutions*
- **Imbalance of power and thin democracy**

Conclusions

- Contextual factors shaping political participation in the digital age remain relatively understudied

More qualitative research is necessary

- Political fear is tightly linked to people's use of digital media

People's fear, which is subject to the political scene, can increase and decrease non-traditional participation

- Digital tools are one of the many factors that explain why civil society dis(engages) from political processes

Even in the digital age, new technology alone cannot give a full account of governance. Digital participation complements analogue political engagement.

Outlook

- **How does digital political engagement translate into analogue participation?**
- **The digital divide:**
 - Age
 - Formal education (critical thinking)
 - Urban-rural split
- **Digital rights**



Q&A

Discussion

1. How has digital media made you more active in politics? Has the internet ever discouraged you from participating in politics?
2. Are digital media and democracy good friends or sworn enemies?
3. What should change in Cambodia's digital landscape to improve people's perception of politics?





Thank you

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