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Political participation in post-authoritarian regimes in the digital age

insights from Cambodia

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

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Abstract

This thesis draws on digital democracy in Cambodia. New technology and social media platforms played a crucial role in easing civil society's political fear in the early 2010s, strengthening non-traditional political participation and making democracy more robust. However, later in the decade, the governmental co-optation of the digital sphere revived political fear, harming non-traditional political engagement and limiting civil society's opportunities of using digital media to shape public institutions. In this study, I argue that the internet has had a limited positive impact on Cambodia's democratic consolidation due to the culture of political fear, a well-embedded trait in many citizens after decades of authoritarian rule and conflict.

This investigation addresses two problematics: the relative lack of knowledge of the circumstantial elements that have influenced political participation in Cambodia – before the digital age and in the Internet era – and the impact of Cambodia's ruling party embracing digital media in response to the earlier democratic expansion thanks to the internet. In doing so, I make three original contributions to the academic literature on digital democracy and Cambodia. First, I show that political fear has shaped political participation in Cambodia, even before the digital age. To explore contextual elements like fear, which are often overlooked by Western-centric research, qualitative methods are adequate. Second, the study integrates digital media in the intersection between fear and political participation. In the internet era, the Cambodian government has co-opted the digital sphere to create a new wave of fear, taking a toll on non-traditional political participation and outweighing the positive reach of the internet to practice politics. Third, I incorporate the political crackdown of 2017 in analysing digital democracy in Cambodia to show new technology's limited positive reach in consolidating democracy, regardless of the earlier democratic expansion made with the internet. Although the conclusions of this thesis are specific to Cambodia, they are relevant to the broader academic literature on digital democracy because they can be transferred to other studies concerning illiberal regimes.

Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of others is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: Marc Piñol Rovira   DATE: 15 September 2021

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List of Acronyms

ADHOC	Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association
CICP	Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace
CNRP	Cambodian National Rescue Party
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CWR	Cyberwar Room
DMC	Data Management Centre
FUNCIPEC	Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique Et Coopératif (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia)
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PM	Prime Minister
PPA	Paris Peace Agreements
RFA	Radio Free Asia
SNS	Social Networking Site
SOC	State of Cambodia
SOS	Spiral of Silence
UNAMIC	United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
VOA	Voice of America
VOD	Voice of Democracy
VPN	Virtual Private Network

1. Introduction

The intersection between digital media and politics – digital democracy – emerged as a global phenomenon because new technology, the internet, and social networking sites like Facebook started reshaping political engagement worldwide. In this thesis, I investigate political participation in post-authoritarian and illiberal contexts in this digital era. Using the case of Cambodia, I identify the culture of political fear as a contextual element that shapes people's political engagement in the digital age – an intersection that is still underexplored by academic research. This study demonstrates that political fear limited actions of non-traditional political participation – such as attending demonstrations and public forums – *before* and *during* the digital age. Before the arrival of the internet and digital media, fear harmed non-traditional participation and fed a thin or procedural democratic system eminently reliant on elections at the expense of other forms of engagement. At the beginning of the internet era, in the early 2010s, the popularisation of digital media and social media platforms started easing civil society's fear, making non-traditional politics more popular among citizens and civil society organisations. That strengthened a thick or substantive form of democracy to complement electoral democracy. However, the governmental embracement of new technology and co-optation of the digital sphere revived political fear among civil society, limiting the earlier democratic progress achieved with the internet. Although technology has improved civil society in numerous ways – for example, it facilitates citizen networks based on trust that enhance political engagement – challenges outweigh opportunities, limiting the positive impact of new technology in consolidating democracy.

Digital democracy proponents and detractors have long addressed the democratising capabilities of new technology. Nevertheless, making sense of the challenges and opportunities digital media offers to participate in politics requires understanding the contextual elements shaping political participation. Many of these circumstantial elements, such as political fear, are highly relevant in post-authoritarian contexts and not always addressed in the literature concerning the global north. In the early years of the digital era in Cambodia, between the late 2000s and early 2010s, civil society used Facebook to ease political fear – an old issue in Cambodian politics – to strengthen non-traditional political participation. Overall, that complemented electoral democracy and improved democracy. Nonetheless, after an initial period of optimism, the challenges of using the internet to engage in politics appeared, showing that digital democracy is a double-edged sword that comes with opportunities and challenges that coexist. In the second half of the 2010s, Cambodia's ruling party instrumentalised the digital sphere to initiate a wave of repression against dissenting voices, inducing fear among people and harming non-traditional participation. Many citizens and organisations dreaded a backlash should people use the internet to engage in political actions the ruling party could

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interpret as a threat to its political hegemony. That explains the limited reach of new technology to improve non-traditional political involvement and democracy in the digital era regardless of the numerous benefits of digital democracy.

In developing a new perspective on digital democracy that considers Cambodia´s illiberal political context to evaluate new technology and democracy, this thesis makes three contributions to academic literature. First, it highlights the culture of political feat as a crucial yet underexplored circumstantial element to understand Cambodia's political scene. Investigating the role of contextual elements like fear allows to provide and insiders views of digital democracy in the country. In highlighting contextual variables, qualitative methods are crucial. This thesis uses people's life stories to uncover and stress the importance of variables like political fear in shaping political participation. In the Cambodia case, like other illiberal regimes, a qualitative study is valuable because many citizens and spokespeople of civil society organisations are becoming increasingly scared of being targeted by the government if they discuss political issues. Second, the investigation incorporates digital media in the debates concerning fear and political participation. It shows that fear primarily interfered with non-traditional political participation *before* the digital age and *after* new technology became highly popular due to the political sphere's governmental co-optation. Third, this thesis incorporates the political crackdown of 2017 in analysing digital democracy in Cambodia to explain democracy's limited consolidation. Considering the crackdown is necessary because, although the political empowerment in the early stages of digital democracy in the country is well researched, research concerning the impact of the governmental co-optation of the digital sphere on democratic consolidation is scarce.

The rest of this chapter frames the research. First, I explain how my experience working in Cambodia during the early stage of its digital age triggered my interest in digital democracy. I also show how my field experience helped me complete this thesis. Second, I present digital democracy as a global phenomenon. Virtually all countries worldwide are witnessing the intersection between digital media and politics. However, how digital media is used and the reasons why people use it differs from country to country, especially between liberal and illiberal political settings. Third, I outline digital democracy in Cambodia. While it is difficult to establish when new technology started influencing the political sphere, the pre-electoral events of the national elections of 2013 will be the starting point. I show that Cambodia offers the opportunity to investigate digital democracy opportunities and challenges in illiberal settings.

1.1. My field experience with digital democracy in Cambodia

I became interested in digital democracy in Cambodia much before writing this thesis. Because of my enthusiasm for East and Southeast Asia, I did my postgraduate studies in East Asian Studies. After completing my taught modules, I joined the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), a policy think tank in Phnom Penh, as a research intern. I collaborated with its activities while completing my master's dissertation. Then, I became a research fellow. The timing of that internship, summer 2013, was critical. I arrived in Phnom Penh one month before that year's national elections. Those were the first elections in Cambodia's digital era. As I will point out in the next section, they were critical for the country's domestic politics because new technology was associated with the outstanding results of one opposition political party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). Those developments were also crucial because staying in Phnom Penh in the second half of 2013 allowed me to witness how the popularisation of digital democracy positively impacted the country's political scene, contributing to a wave of political optimism.

After my internship at CICP, I stayed in Cambodia to teach politics and social sciences to undergraduate students in Phnom Penh until 2017. That period was beneficial in two ways. First, I gained a deeper understanding of the local political context from the perspective of the local community. I witnessed the country's most relevant social and political challenges that often derived from its turbulent past for a much more extended period. Nonetheless, I also saw its developments, including digital media in the political scene. For instance, I experienced for the first time how political fear limited the reach of many discussions in the learning environment and how social media was – very slowly – changing that. Thanks to my job as a lecturer and research fellow at CICP, I worked closely with more local people, giving me an insider's view of Cambodia's domestic politics. I learned a lot from my students and co-workers, who shared their lives with me. In parallel to learning about the country, I started having countless new questions concerning the politics of Cambodia. That was probably the first step towards my PhD – but I was not aware of it.

I also developed a personal and professional network of contacts. Thanks to a relatively long period working in the country, I met people from several sectors, including representatives from local and international organisations, politicians, royal family members, academics, journalists, and activists. I also developed a network of people outside my profession. The network I build would then become essential to make the fieldwork period more efficient. For example, before flying to Phnom Penh in June 2019, I contacted numerous organisations to arrange meetings and reach out to new institutions.

All in all, witnessing first-hand critical social media's intersection with politics was triggered my interest in digital democracy and its link with liberal democracy, which has resulted in this doctoral thesis. As I mentioned, my network of contacts in the country was crucial. It gave me the confidence to write a research proposal and discuss it with local experts on the history and politics of Cambodia. Later, in 2019, the same network was also vital to collect primary data to conduct this investigation. Overall, travelling across East and Southeast Asia and spending four years living there during a critical period to witness Cambodia's social and political development taught me a great deal about Southeast Asia. Still, I was left with plenty of questions to answer, resulting in a research proposal to do a PhD.

1.2. Digital democracy as a global phenomenon

Over the last two decades, the international community has witnessed the popularisation of the internet and digital media platforms like Facebook. Smartphones have become one of the most popular – if not the most popular – digital appliances to access the internet. According to the socially led creative agency We Are Social (Kemp, 2021), in January 2021, 59.5% of the world population were internet consumers, 66.6% were unique smartphone users, and 53.6% were active users of social media. The global eruption of the internet and the increasing number of daily appliances that incorporate sensors to allow the exchange of data through the internet – most notably, mobile phones – has translated into significant changes in how we perform many daily actions. Crucially, societies are increasingly relying on digital platforms to communicate with others, to access the news (Simon, Bass and Boelman, 2017), and share them (Chung, 2008). New opportunities to access and share information would become one of the digital democracy cornerstones, as shown throughout the thesis. However, nearly 60% of the world population being internet consumers is the average calculation. The internet adoption levels vary significantly among countries. For example, 99% of Bahrain people have access to the internet, compared to 13.3% of people living in Burundi (Kemp, 2021). These differences matter because they hide deep social, political, and economic divergences between countries that must be considered, and they also determine how fast a country digitalises its society. In Cambodia, 52.6% of its population has access to the internet (We Are Social, 2012). Nonetheless, contextualising Cambodia´s internet penetration requires considering several variables such as the country's relative low media age – 25.8% (ibid) – due to the genocide of the 1970s, a relatively low urbanisation index – 24.5% (ibid) – or an upper secondary enrolment rate of 38.75% (UNESCO, 2020).

New technology also intersects with the political arena, giving way to digital democracy: using digital tools and media to engage in politics (Lindner and Aichholzer, 2020, p.11; Simon, Bass and Boelman, 2017, p.11). Below, I show how new technology reshaped liberal democracies like Spain and illiberal regimes like Tunisia. Initially, platforms like Facebook gained popularity because users could post photos and connect with old friends and strangers alike (Phong, Srou and Sola, 2016). Then, people quickly learnt that they could also collaborate to increase their power in the political arena beyond voting in elections (Dahlberg, 2011; Saud and Margono, 2021). New technology emerged as a tool to shape non-traditional political participation, such as organising analogue political gatherings, hosting digital political forums, or communicating more efficiently with political leaders. (Kneuer and Datts, 2020; Nabatchi and Mergel, 2010; Shirky, 2011). Nonetheless, what matters is that new technology responds to the needs of people in different political contexts.

In 2011, in Spain, the anti-austerity movement *los indignados*[1] took thousands of people to the streets in several cities across the country, calling for a regeneration of the country's democratic system using online platforms (Cristancho and Anduiza, 2015). During those developments, protesters benefited from digital media and social media platforms to spread information among the public, even before breaking into mainstream media (ibid). Moreover, the internet also improved protesters' organisation skills to echo people's political views. "The proliferation of social spaces on Internet has provided citizens with the technological tools not only to consume, but also to produce news" (Casero-Ripollés and Feenstra, 2012, p.3). Therefore, civil society improved its political capability by creating content and sharing it instantly.

The Arab Spring is another example that shows the power of digital democracy in the early 2010s. People protested against authoritarian rulers in several countries in the Arab world (Korany and El-Mahdi (Eds), 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer, 2013). In Tunisia, the focal point of the movement, protesters directed their anger against the oppressive Tunisian regime. They also condemned the low living standards of many people in the country (Willis, 2012). Social media allowed the creation of solid political opposition to the regime and to organise political protests. The action of a vendor who set himself on fire to protest the harassment he suffered from the local authorities went viral on social media, becoming the catalyst of a nationwide revolution against Tunisia's autocratic rule (Halverson, Ruston and Trethewey, 2013). Then, protesters used social media to circulate information quickly and improve their networks and organisation (Anderson, 2013; Fraihat and Yaseen, 2020; Guedoir, 2018).

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[1] *Indignado/a* is the Spanish term for indignant person or someone who is angry about something. In Spain, *los indignados* movement is also known as 15-M (15 of March).

Spain and Tunisia are two examples showing the positive influence of the internet in improving civil society involvement in politics. From the early 2010s, digital democracy went global, not necessarily leading to mass protests like those in Spain or the Arab world, but simply changing the nature of people's political participation. Inevitably, the digitalisation of the political sphere resulted in a debate about the potential impacts of using digital media in the political arena. Many initial views presented digital media as "liberation technology" (Diamond, 2010, p.70) that could fix the democratic ills and democratise societies worldwide like lack of communication between people and the political class or people's lack of political engagement (Christiansen, 2012; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Joseph, 2011).

Digital democracy detractors warned against the dangers of new technology and politics and avoided labelling the internet as the ultimate mechanism to strengthen democratic governance (Etling, Faris and Palfrey, 2010; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011). Detractors emphasized the challenges of digital democracy and the importance of considering the political environment of each case (Diamond, 2010). Earlier, I mentioned that accessible information and the change to share with just one click are opportunities for people to become more aware of the latest political development. Still, the digital sphere magnified challenges like filter bubbles, making easy access to many news sources less effective since people tended to select what to read based on their pre-conceived ideas. In Chapter 2, I analyse the views of supporters and detractors. This thesis engages with the concepts of both groups. Still, it highlights that the views of detractors are more realistic than the views of supporters. They embrace digital democracy challenges *and* opportunities to assess the efficiency of new technology to engage in politics since they both coexist.

The internet progressively gained the attention of the political class in the 2000s and early 2010s. Political leaders worldwide used social media to seem more approachable to citizens who had been in the background (Hennen, 2020). In Chapter 5, I show how PM Hun Sen greatly benefited from Facebook to win the hearts of many rural people in Cambodia (Soeung, 2016). However, new technology in the hands of autocratic leaders resulted in increased surveillance and, overall, a threat to human rights (Shahbaz, 2018). The Chinese Communist Party is one example of a government using new technology to monitor and crackdown dissenting voices to retain political power. As I will demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 6, embracing the positions of digital democracy advocates and detractors to analyse the impact of using new technology in the political field is necessary. In the second half of the 2010s, the CPP in Cambodia used digital media to make its members look more approachable in the eyes of everyday citizens while increasing political repression against its critics, resulting in a political crackdown.

Being context-sensitive demonstrates that even if people from around the globe are using the same digital platforms such as Facebook, people worldwide use them differently, responding to specific social and political factors. Therefore, digital democracy is highly contextual. When *los indignados* took the streets of several cities in Span, the country's democratic system was relatively strong. Still, people asked for reforms to improve it. As a result, civil society strengthened its presence in the public sphere (Casero-Ripollés and Feenstra, 2012), and the movement resulted in the political party Podemos. This new political party emerged from *los indignados*. In Tunisia, people protested to topple an illiberal government. The revolution resulted in remarkable democratic improvements. However, the country is still fighting for prosperity and more democratic progress (Guedoir, 2018) – as I explain in Chapter 2, democracy is a process that consists of periods of expansion and contraction. Therefore, the analysis of democracy should be in relative terms rather than absolute. Even if people in Tunisia and Spain both used digital media to strengthen their positions, considering context is crucial to understanding the motivations behind those protests, how people used the internet, how relevant was it, and why. This investigation greatly emphasises context and identifies fear as a critical element in Cambodia, undermining non-traditional political participation. Since digital democracy became a global phenomenon, it has been widely researched in Western contexts (Castells, 2009; Etling, Faris and Palfrey, 2010; Freeman and Quirke, 2013; Hennen, 2020; Hindman, 2009; Joyce (Ed), 2010; Morozov, 2011). The academic community concerning the global south has produced ground-breaking research on the impact of new technology on politics (Cheeseman et al., 2020; Nyabola, 2018; Phong, Srou and Sola, 2016; Sinpeng, 2021; Soeung, 2013) since the Arab Spring began. However, studies investigating the impact of digital media in the global south, illiberal, and post-authoritarian regimes are still underrepresented in the literature (Lee, 2017) – predominantly qualitative studies examining country-specific contextual elements shaping digital democracy in the Global South (Dahlberg, 2011).

Scholarly literature on digital democracy can be expanded in two ways. First, by exploring the factors that make up the relationship between digital media and democracy in post-authoritarian regimes. Thus, exploring *how* digital media matters to engage in politics. Exploring the political factors that influence political participation in illiberal contexts in the digital is necessary because Western-centric literature on democracy often overlooks them (Lee, 2017). This thesis emphasises that political fear has been one of these critical factors, which has shaped political participation in Cambodia since, at least, the end of the colonial period. While many studies have used quantitative methods to determine the correlation between digital media and political engagement (Saud and Margono, 2021; Sinpeng, 2021), fewer research has employed qualitative methods to explain such link. This thesis uses qualitative methods to add value to existing research. It benefits from the stories of several members

of Cambodia´s civil society to bring up political fear as an underexplored element that has deeply influenced political participation in the country.

The second way to expand knowledge about the impact of digital democracy in illiberal regimes is using the lens of democratic consolidation. Democracy and democratic consolidation are tightly interlinked. While democracy focuses on the specific elements that make up a democratic society and government – political participation, for example – democratic consolidation concerns the expansion and contractions of democratic governance over a particular period. Focusing on an extended period allows zooming out to investigate the bigger picture of digital democracy, including periods of democratic expansion and contraction. For example, recently, researchers have studied the latest political developments in countries that went through the Arab Spring ten years ago (Guedoir, 2018), incorporating periods of democratic contraction in the broader picture to evaluate the state of democracy. However, these studies are scarce. This study contributes to this growing body of literature by focusing on digital democracy and participation in Cambodia after the digitalisation of civil society and the state sector.

1.3. Digital democracy in Cambodia

New digital technology changes political participation by opening up the public sphere. Still, how that happens and under what circumstances differs from country to country. This section shows that Cambodia is a pertinent case to further knowledge on digital democracy. Digital democracy triggered a period of democratic expansion in the early 2010s and the ongoing democratic contraction, challenging the democratic structures established in 1991 after decades of authoritarian rule and violent conflict. Determining the exact moment when digital democracy started shaping politics is unlikely because the digitalisation of a society is not a specific event that happens at a given moment but rather a process over an extended period. In Cambodia, the process began between the late 2000s and early 2010s with the popularisation of the internet. The national elections of 2013 were the first remarkable event where the intersection between digital media and politics became evident. Ahead of the polls in summer 2013, when smartphones and Facebook were becoming highly popular among Cambodian people, the Australian broadcaster ABC was one of the outlets that explained how vital social media was for young political activists.

Crucial to the Opposition's campaign are young voters like Kimsour Lim, a 24-year-old university student with a love for social media.

"I use Facebook to coordinate with the youth to inform them when we are marching for the National Rescue Party," she says.

"Initially the youth, including myself, didn't understand and were not interested in Facebook or politics, but later, I began to understand many problems in our society.

"I always send my friends information through Facebook, because none of the 14 government TV channels support the CNRP."

The ruling Cambodia People's Party is still favoured to win this election because of continuing popularity with the poorer and rural communities (Oaten, 2013, n.p).

Kimsour was just one among many people who used the internet with political aims in Cambodia in 2013, almost a decade ago. What stands out is that, as she indicated, many citizens did not understand or were not interested in politics before the digital age, and how platforms like Facebook started to change that, making people better informed and coordinated and, ultimately, more interested in politics. It became clear *that* the internet mattered concerning political participation. Still, understanding *how* new technology changed people's involvement in politics and the state of democracy is more complex. Kimsour's words reflect the importance of non-traditional political actions that transcend voting in elections, such as using Facebook to campaign or protest. Chapter 5 will explain that civil society improved non-traditional political participation because its members used new technology to ease their political fear.

Investigating digital democracy in Cambodia means researching a post-authoritarian and illiberal regime that, in the last decade, has shown that new technology comes with opportunities and challenges to strengthen political participation and democracy. After its colonial independence from France in 1953, Cambodia's political leaders displayed authoritarian traits despite the celebration of elections. More remarkably, there were several episodes of violence and conflict, such as the Cambodian civil war between 1970 and 1975, the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979, and ten years of Vietnamese occupation between 1979 and 1989 (Chandler, 1993, 1993, 2012; Keller, 2005; Kiernan, 2008). Therefore, Cambodia is a pertinent case to examine digital democracy in illiberal settings. It allows considering how historical contextual elements from authoritarian contexts like fear define minimalistic democratic systems in the present and how new technology contribute to making democracy more substantive.

In 1991, the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) were signed, and Cambodia initiated its transition towards a liberal democratic system (Gottesman, 2004). However, the democratic transition was a double-

edged sword. The country built democratic institutions and celebrated its first elections in the new democratic era in 1993 (Strangio, 2020) – as of today, Cambodia has celebrated local and national elections regularly. However, the implementation of the new democratic mechanisms was poor. Prime Minister Hun Sen dominated the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the entire political scene since Vietnam appointed him Prime Minister (PM) of Cambodia in 1985 (Morgenbesser, 2018). Then, in 1997, he staged a violent coup against his former co-PM Norodom Ranariddh, becoming solo PM and Cambodia's hegemonic political leader (Peou, 1998a; Strangio, 2020). In other words, Cambodia's newly established democratic structures were in place, and elections were celebrated regularly. Still, the consolidation of these democratic mechanisms has been weak (Morgenbesser, 2017, 2019), allowing the CPP to establish and maintain a democratic façade – primarily through elections – despite allegations of political freedoms being compromised (Adams, 2015; Freedom House, 2019). The case of Cambodia allows examining the impact of new technology in political regimes that although they are technically called democracies, the efficacy of democratic structures is weak, leaving room for substantial democratic improvement. These types of regimes are often called "hybrid regimes" (Bogaards, 2009, p.339; Wigell, 2008, p.230). Yet, this suffers from a democratising bias – implying that it is a transitional regime (towards democracy) – which is why Levitsky and Way (2002) propose the term "competitive authoritarianism" (p.51) as a diminished form of authoritarianism. In Chapter 2, I discuss these terms further.

Socially and politically speaking, the early 2010s were a turning point for Cambodia. Smartphones and digital media became popular quickly, particularly Facebook (Phong, Srou and Sola, 2016). The impact of the digitalisation of the political scene was evident in the context of the national elections of 2013. As I outlined at the beginning of this section, civil society gained access to a wide variety of news sources that were an alternative to state-controlled media, which included local and international independent news outlets and the content that activists or local organisations produced and shared (Hughes, 2013; Soeung, 2013; Vong and Hok, 2018). The elections reflected those developments. The CNRP, the strongest opposition party, obtained 55 seats in the National Assembly and the CPP, 68 – in the Cambodian context, those results threatened the dominance of the CPP (Hughes, 2013).

Moreover, many of Cambodia's civil society sectors carried on demonstrations, using digital media to make their voices heard, disputing the win of the ruling party CPP (Sereyvisith, 2014; Un, 2015). Therefore, digital media became a mechanism to promote non-traditional forms of political participation, which people used to explore alternative narratives and options to the ruling party CPP – something that the exceptional results of the CNRP in the 2013 elections reflected. Exploring the benefits of digital media in Cambodia contributes to academic debates regarding the opportunities of

using the internet to strengthen political participation. More specifically, it allows incorporating new technology in the intersection between fear and political involvement.

The second half of that decade was radically different compared to the first half. After civil society's political empowerment and the CNRP's outstanding results, the ruling party CPP embraced social media. With Facebook, many of its members – including PM Hun Sen – projected proximity with citizens, disseminated their policies more effectively and showed their personal lives on the net so people could relate to them (Soeung, 2016). With the governmental adoption of new technology, pressure on political liberties also increased, and dissenting voices being monitored online and offline cases were common (CCHR, 2019). Pressure on civil society's political freedoms resulted in several waves of arrests against dissenting voices (Ben and Baliga, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Morgenbesser, 2019). The situation escalated to a nationwide political crackdown, which peaked in 2017 with the dissolution of the CNRP coinciding with a crackdown on traditional media, too (Ben and Baliga, 2017). The CNRP's dissolution and increased pressure on independent media outlets limited people's chances to explore diverse political options, challenging the democratic progress made earlier in that decade thanks to digital media. Thus, considering the earlier period of democratic expansion and the more recent period of democracy allows exploring while acknowledging its challenges and opportunities, affecting the consolidation of democracy.

All in all, the case of Cambodia is pertinent to further knowledge on digital democracy in competitive authoritarian regimes because some traits of its authoritarian past, such as political fear, have persisted while democratic mechanisms were established.

1.4. Aim of the study and research questions

As I have shown, Cambodia is a case study that exemplifies the political relevance of digital media in illiberal regimes. New technology propitiated a period of democratic expansion when people's non-traditional participation soared. Still, the digitalisation of the government triggered a crackdown on political freedoms. This thesis investigates how digital democracy has changed civil society's political involvement in Cambodian politics and how, more than a decade after the country initiated its digitalisation, new technology has altered the state of democracy.

Accordingly, I outline the following research question: how has new technology influenced political participation in Cambodia in the digital era? This investigation has three secondary questions:

Secondary 1:   what are some of the specific contextual elements that influence political participation in today´s illiberal Cambodia?

Secondary 2:   how does civil society's digitalisation change political participation in the Internet era in Cambodia?

Secondary 3:   how does the digitalisation of the state sector impact members of Cambodia's civil society who were previously empowered through digital media?

As Chapter 3 explains in much greater detail, the reasoning of this study is inductive. A bottom-up approach is appropriate considering the aim of the research because, which seeks to highlight variables that link digital media, democracy, and democratisation that can inform existing knowledge – rather than testing existing theories. It has a qualitative approach and uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ordinary citizens and spokespeople of civil society organisations to gain a deeper – rather than broad – understanding of the factors influencing people's use of digital media to practise politics in illiberal settings. The sample contains fifty-three respondents from civil society in Cambodia, divided between everyday citizens and civil society organisations, all from Phnom Penh.

1.5. Structure of the thesis

Along with this introductory chapter, the thesis has six more chapters to frame the research problem, outline the methodology, analyse data, build the argument, and present the findings. Chapter 2 sets out the conceptual and theoretical orientation of this thesis. It reviews the existing literature on digital democracy and is organised around four key concepts. First, democratic governance. I suggest democracy is a preferred system over autocratic regimes because it puts civil society as a vital actor among all actors involved in its administration. In this section, I incorporate two crucial elements to building the argument. I conceptualise civil society as an independent actor from the state and political participation as a mechanism for members of civil society to influence state structures. Second, digital democracy. Besides conceptualising it, this section examines the views of its advocates and detractors. The literature underlines that digital media strengthens and weakens political participation. However, these two processes usually take place simultaneously and are subject to specific contextual settings. Third, political fear and trust. These two elements are relevant to building the thesis's overarching argument because they are definitory elements in many post-conflict and illiberal regimes. I analyse

their political importance relevance and link them to political participation. Fourth, democratic consolidation. This concept brings together all the previous elements of democratic governance to examine the overall impact of new technology on democratic government, rather than focusing on specific aspects like civil society or political participation.

Chapter 3 concerns the research design to justify collecting data to answer the research question. The chapter has three parts: approach, data, and data analysis. In the first – approach – I explain the inductive reasoning of the study. The thesis relies on primary and secondary data to formulate claims informing existing knowledge rather than testing existing theoretical claims. I justify selecting interviews to obtain primary data, explain the sample composition, and outline ethical considerations. This thesis also relies on secondary data to generate research outputs. Secondary sources are used throughout the research process to back primary data and triangulate. Secondary data consists of academic sources, reports from local and international organisations, and media sources. Finally, the third part gives a detailed account of the thematic analysis's seven phases to analyse raw data, from the coding of raw data to the final report. It also describes the challenges I faced during data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 is the first empirical chapter of the thesis. It explores the roots of political fear with an analysis of the political landscape of Cambodia between the end of the colonial era in 1953, when the country obtained independence from France and the early 2010s when digital tools and media became popular in the country. I claim that political fear is a problem affecting Cambodia's political scene that has deep historical roots dating back to, at least, the colonial period that has undermined primarily non-traditional political participation, allowing political elites to gain political power. The chapter has two parts. First, I explore fear between the end of colonialism and 1991, when the Paris Peace Agreements were signed – a period characterised by authoritarian leaders and conflict, like the civil war in the 1970s and the dictatorship of the Khmer Rouge – that undermined non-traditional participation. The second part examines fear in the democratic era. It shows that Cambodia turned into a new authoritarian country regardless of the newly established democratic structures. Political elites have protracted political fear to undermine non-traditional engagement and maintain their political dominance, resulting in a power gap between civil society and the state sector.

Chapter 5 investigates the intersection between digital media and politics in the 2010s. I sustain that new technology allowed some members of civil society in Cambodia to ease their political fear and strengthen their non-traditional political participation to complement electoral democracy – that period also contributed to consolidating democracy. However, the latter digitalisation of the state sector triggered a period of democratic contraction from 2015, limiting the democratic gains that civil

society had achieved. This chapter explores digital democracy in two parts. The first one shows that political fear had resulted in a poor relationship between the state sector and civil society. However, in the early 2010s, civil society used digital media to challenge the culture of fear, allowing them to engage more actively in non-traditional politics like discussions or demonstrations – although that was not free of challenges, as the digital divide exemplifies. The second part shows that the digitalisation of the ruling party resulted in a political crackdown that limited civil society's political freedoms and their non-traditional political participation. The digital strategy of the ruling party mixed a gentle approach to digital media – helping many politicians projecting a charming image of themselves – with aggressive methods to co-opt the digital sphere and silence dissenting voices.

Chapter 6 examines the consequences of the political crackdown. It demonstrates that the state sector used digital media to increase political repression against dissenting voices and revive fear. Consequently, the public sphere was wrecked, and the ruling party reinforced its dominance. Regardless of the democratic backslide, some members of civil society could develop new digital strategies to adapt to the new political landscape. That chapter has two parts. First, I show that, after embracing new technology, the Government revived the culture of political fear. Its characteristics were like those that existed before: limited access to opposition forces, people's political isolation, and self-censorship. The novelty is that fear was hybridised. So, repression benefited from the online and offline spheres. Using only digital media to repress some people's views was enough. Still, digital media complemented traditional offline methods of repression to silence the loudest voices, like those of activists. The second part analyses the consequences of the new wave of fear. It argues that the new wave of fear challenged the formation of publics and the generation of public opinion, thus decreasing civil society's chances to engage in non-traditional politics and influence public institutions. However, regardless of the new political scene, this part also shows how some civil society actors have been able to use digital media to develop new strategies, such as creating trust, to overcome the difficulties of the new political scene.

Chapter 7 wraps up the thesis and concludes that regardless of the many benefits associated with digital democracy, challenges outweigh opportunities in Cambodia a decade after the country initiated the digitalisation of its political sphere. This study feeds the body of knowledge on digital democracy in illiberal regimes by using qualitative methods, bringing to the foreground context-specific elements often overlooked by wester-centric literature. In this thesis, I have focused on political fear, a factor that undermined non-traditional political participation before and during the digital era.

2. Literature review

This chapter outlines the existing literature on digital democracy on which I build upon to answer the research question that I stated at the end of the previous chapter, "how has new technology influenced political participation in Cambodia in the digital era?". It is organised in four parts: democracy, digital democracy, political fear and trust, and democratic consolidation.

The first part conceptualises democracy as a preferred form of government over illiberal and autocratic regimes because modern democracies make citizens vital agents in the decision-making process. Therefore, I will present civil society as a separate actor from the state sector. In equalising political power and contributing to building a democratic society, political participation is essential. People can use certain political freedoms – constitutional democracy – to make their voices heard and electoral democracy to choose their political representatives. This thesis distinguishes between *thin* and *thick* democracy. The former emphasises the role of elections and sees democracy as a *procedure*. In contrast, the latter highlights the intrinsic benefits of democracy, presenting it as a *substantive* ongoing process. These two views are presented as complementary, thus resulting in a *thin-thick* approach adopted throughout the study. This section is vital to the argument of the thesis because it also conceptualises civil society as a central actor in a democracy that benefits from political participation to create horizontal citizen networks and form public opinion, strengthening vertical structures to improve interaction with the state sector. Given people's central role in governance, this section will distinguish between traditional and non-traditional political participation, emphasising the latter.

The second section incorporates digital democracy into the discussion. Using digital media to practice politics has advocates and detractors, stressing digital media opportunities and challenges to engage in politics, respectively. Nonetheless, the pros and cons of digital democracy coexist. That is why this thesis emphasises making the most of the possibilities of digital democracy to overcome its challenges, requiring a comprehensive analysis of digital democracy that considers opportunities and challenges, context, and how digital political participation influences analogue engagement.

The third part explores political fear and lack of trust as critical characteristics in post-authoritarian regimes and poorly consolidated democratic societies. This section emphasises *that* fear and trust influence participation. More importantly, it stresses that exploring *how* fear and trust shape people's political engagement in the digital era is necessary to advance knowledge on digital democracy. Considering fear and trust in the analysis of digital democracy allows incorporating specific contextual markers relevant to illiberal contexts, which are relatively underexplored.

Finally, the fourth section introduces democratic consolidation to assess the impact of digital democracy. Democratic consolidation focuses on whether democracy has "deepened" over some time. What constitutes democratic consolidation can be ambiguous. So, building on the thin-thick approach to democracy, this part emphasises that to deepen democratic rule, strengthening constitutional democracy is a priority. Incorporating the role of democratic consolidation and its link to thick democracy is helpful to integrate periods of democratic expansion and contraction in the analysis and explore how they influence democratic governance.

2.1. Civil society and political participation in democratic regimes

This section introduces democratic governance as a critical concept framing the overarching discussion on digital media and political participation. Democracy as a form of government and framework has two core characteristics: civil society and political participation. This study assumes that these two features make democracy a preferred form of government over illiberal and autocratic regimes where civil society's political role and participation tend to be weaker. In future sections of this thesis, people's centrality in politics will be essential to analyse how and why digital media reshaped their political role.

In this part of the chapter, I make four claims. First, multiparty elections and political liberties make civil society an active and vital actor in decision-making. Second, the thin-thick approach to democracy ensures people's political freedoms, so people can make informed decisions before they cast a ballot in local and national elections. Making informed choices makes universal suffrage meaningful and strengthens the relationship between civil society actors and civil society and the state sector. Third, civil society is an independent actor from the state that comprises several members, such as activists, the media sector, or everyday people, who are subject to unique contextual settings that vary from case to case. Four, political participation is a non-static concept. This thesis emphasises the centrality of non-traditional engagement to complement traditional participation and enhance civil society's active and central role in democratic governance.

2.1.1. Democratic governance

Governance is "the action or manner of governing – that is, of directing, guiding, or regulating individuals, organisations, or nations in conduct or actions" (Lynn, 2011, p.671). Among the typologies of governments found it the literature (Bogaards, 2009; Diamond, 2002; Wigell, 2008), democracy emerged as a popular one, especially in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union when numerous former Soviet countries endorsed the benefits of liberal democracy, such as civil and political freedoms and social inclusiveness (Brinkerhoff, 2000; Bollen, 2009; Freeden, 2015; Plattner, 1999). Democratic governance became a straightforward political organisation to oppose illiberal and autocratic regimes (Bollen, 2009; Kurki, 2010). The breakdown of the Soviet Union consolidated the third wave of democratisation (Huntington, 1993), a global trend that saw countries worldwide – in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa – transitioning to democracy since 1974 when the Carnation Revolution in Portugal resulted in a revolutionary process that ended in a democratic Portugal (ibid). Given its success, some regarded democracy as the ultimate form of governance that would mark the endpoint of sociocultural evolution (Fukuyama, 1989). Democracy has meant different things to different people in different periods (Dahl, 2000). Hence, its countless definitions highlight various aspects of democracy. For Lipset, democracy is

> a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials. It is a social mechanism for the resolution of the problem of societal decision-making among conflicting interest groups which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence these decisions through their ability to choose among alternative contenders for political office (Lipset, 1959, p.71).

Lipset's conceptualisation emphasises the vitality of representative democracy and multiparty elections. Civil society is essential in democratic systems because people are responsible for choosing their political representatives. Dewey (1937) adopts a different approach and sees democracy as a way of life that goes beyond a form of government. In his view, democracy is "necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals" (Dewey, 1937, p.457 in Escobar and Elstub, 2019). Regardless of envisioning democracy in different ways, Lipset and Dewey show how democracy involves citizens in ongoing decision-making processes, making them core agents in governance. As Liptset's definition of democracy shows, citizen political involvement can be indirect or representative – for example, when people vote in multiparty elections. It can also be direct without intermediaries (Barber, 2009) when people participate in public forums or vote in referenda.

Nonetheless, representative and direct democracy are not incompatible. Most modern democracies combine features of both types of democracy. The centrality of civil society in governance remains a core idea in today's democratic narratives (Escobar and Elstub, 2019). People have a meaningful amount of political power. More crucially, they are responsible for their political empowerment through actions like deliberation – later in this section, I will talk about political participation. People's active political involvement is a distinctive characteristic of democracy compared to illiberal and autocratic systems, where political authorities centralise much political power.

From a normative standpoint, modern democracies make people active agents in decision-making processes in two ways. First, electoral democracy ensures people's right to vote in multi-party elections. Second, constitutional democracy provides political rights so all social groups can compete for power and shape public institutions (Brinkerhoff, 2000; Bollen, 2009; Freeden, 2015; Plattner, 1999). Fundamentally, these two democratic characteristics are interdependent. Modern democracies rely on multiparty elections. Still, these are only meaningful if citizens have opportunities to make informed choices and reflect on their views without coercion (Dryzek, 2002, p.8). In other words, free and fair elections require political liberties. I reiterate that this is the normative approach to democracy. In section 2.1.5, I acknowledge that, in practice, democracies are flawed and imperfect.

This thesis emphasises the vital role of civil and political liberties in strengthening democratic governance as a fundamental step *before celebrating* elections. I do *not* suggest that multiparty elections are not an essential characteristic of democracy; I suggest that people's freedoms precede meaningful elections. Moreover, with these democratic characteristics, this thesis assumes that democracy is preferable over illiberal and autocratic political regimes.

Below, I use the thin and thick approaches to democracy to discuss why political liberties are a premise to meaningful elections and show why both elements are essential in a democratic system. In the analytical chapters, I use the case of Cambodia to show that, in illiberal contexts, ensuring political liberties is particularly important to strengthen democratic governance.

2.1.2. The thin and thick views on democratic governance

Placing more weight on elections *or* political freedoms results in two conceptualisations of democracy. The "thin" (Bellamy and Castiglione, 2013, p.208) approach to democracy – also known as "minimalist" (Bidner, Francois and Trebbi, 2014: 2) or "procedural" (Diamond, 2002, p.21; Schumpeter and Swedberg, 2005, p.269) – prioritises people's private rights and interests, which are then aggregated and maximised through democratic elections (ibid). Thin democracy puts "competitive elections as the fulcrum of the very definition of democracy" (Bidner, Francois and Trebbi, 2014: 2). This way, democracy becomes a *procedure* or process to legitimate the mandate of relatively small elites who hold most of the political power (Loh, 2008). "The positive, participatory, task of democratic politics is conceived largely in terms of the negative, protective, task. The public interest is construed as the product of a system that maximizes the possibility of each affected agent to block those interferences with their individual rights they deem unnecessary" (Bellamy and Castiglione, 2013, p.210). Therefore, the thin approach to democracy reflects an individualist and aggregative way of engaging in politics, whereby individuals express their preference for a candidate or party. At the same time, voters also block the empowerment of alternatives options.

In contrast, "thick" (Bellamy and Castiglione, 2013, p.208) or "substantive" (Jacobs and Saphiro, 1994, p.9) democracy highlights the common good of people (the collective) over citizens' individual will. Substantive democracy sees the demos – a collective agent made of individuals "who are part of a pervasive basic structure" (Saunders, 2012, p.294) – as an agent with an active and participatory role in governance that can affect the decisions made in their name. To reach unity, inclusive civil and political rights are imperative (Brinkerhoff, 2000; Bollen, 2009; Freeden, 2015; Plattner, 1999).

> The governing body, be it an elected parliament or an unelected council, gains its authority by reproducing internally the same kind of unity (of the nation, for instance) that allegedly characterizes the political body at large. Democratic representation reflects a unity of interests that already exists before the political process is in place and which deliberation among representatives merely seeks to clarify and express (Bellamy and Castiglione, 2013, p.210).

Therefore, as Bellami and Castiglione note, thick democracy emphasises that political liberties are necessary to reach a unity of interests. More crucially, the harmony of interests can inform elections. The distinction between thin and thick democracy translates into different democratic benefits. On the one hand, thin democracy stresses the instrumental benefits of democratic governance and views democracy as a valuable concept (Cunningham, 2002). The instrumental approach aggregates

personal views and interests since everyone has good political power or capacity to influence public institutions (Corbridge, 2002). Compared to thick democracy, the instrumental thesis focuses on increased participation, which requires a lower degree of unity to achieve the common good. Therefore, with a thin approach, democracy becomes the ultimate *goal* rather than a process.

On the other hand, a thick approach to democracy emphasises the participatory dimension of democracy to achieve the common good (Cunningham, 2002). For example, deliberation as a form of political participation is seen as a *process* to achieve the common good. Therefore, participatory actions are also the main benefit of democratic governance. Participatory politics are necessary to protect people's interests and avoid being manipulated by the state apparatus (Bellamy and Castiglione, 2013). "What is valuable is whatever is considered worthy about participation – the solidarity or fellow feeling with which it imbues participants, its salutary effects on people's characters, and so on – and democracy is obviously valued not in itself but because it is conducive to these goals" (Cunningham, 2002, p.150). The centrality of democracy's intrinsic values mirrors democracy as an ongoing *process* rather than a final goal.

As I have shown, the thin and thick approaches emphasise different aspects of democracy. Still, these are not exempt from various challenges. Both have strengths and weaknesses. The thin approach highlights the potential of individual decisions. Still, moving beyond existing conditions might be challenging due to people's lack of direct mutual interaction (Bellamy and Castiglione, 2013). Thick democracy also has strengths and weaknesses. It seeks people's active participation to achieve the common good. However, throughout this process, pluralism might not be fully respected.

As I mentioned earlier, this thesis emphasises the importance of civil and political liberties to achieve a whole democratic experience, including multiparty elections. Accordingly, I stress that the intrinsic benefits of democratic governance derived from a thick approach to democracy are vital in healthy modern democracies. Nonetheless, multiparty elections remain equally relevant since they are the mechanism through which people choose their representatives. Given the importance of *both* elements, a dichotomous approach focusing on one at the expense of the other is not likely to produce the most critical analysis of democratic governance (Zakaria, 1997). This study emphasises an approach that acknowledges the essential role of liberties *and* elections. That is especially relevant in post-authoritarian regimes like Cambodia that transitioned to democracy but failed to consolidate their democratic structures. The result has been an illiberal democracy where regular elections occur, but people have limited political liberties to participate in political processes.

Bellamy and Castiglione (2013) suggest a third way, a "thick-thin" (p.212) model that combines the best attributes of the thin and thick approaches to democracy. They argue that making both views work together overcomes the fact that neither builds a dynamic and interactive process between the represented and their representatives. "In all these cases, representatives depend on the revealed preferences of their principals. However, a relational view interprets the relationship between representatives and the represented in more dynamic terms" (ibid). Therefore, combining both creates a dynamic relationship that entails a vertical dialogue between the represented and their representatives and a horizontal dialogue between the represented. This study adopts this thin-thick approach. This view on democracy reflects the importance placed on civil society in democratising states. In theory, the thin-thick system makes civil society actors active and interactive political agents (horizontal process). At the same time, their interaction with the state sector is also fluid (vertical process). The thin-thick approach ensures that citizens develop their political views and make informed choices in elections, contributing to a substantive model of democratic governance.

Pettit (2005) describes the thick-thin approach as a matter of "civility" (p.167). It requires two elements. First, people's interests must converge to some degree. That makes the way towards the common good smoother regardless of the coexistence of majority and minority groups (Dahl, 2000). The second element that the thin-thick approach requires is a robust public sphere. Habermas (1991) defined the public sphere as being "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (ibid: 176) and can be made of acts such as dialogue to generate dialogue and opinions, which serves to legitimate authority and achieve the common will in a democracy (Rutherford, 2000). Therefore, in the thin-tick approach, the public sphere is necessary to improve horizontal relationships between civil society actors and a vertical relationship between civil society and the state sector (vertical communication) (Miller, 2009).

Bellamy and Castiglione's (2013) thin-thick approach shows that democratic governance has intrinsic *and* instrumental benefits. With this approach, societies can focus on everyday participatory actions to achieve the common good while still respecting individuals' rights to get closer to the ideal and instrumental benefits of democratic governance. This study adopts the thin-thick approach and contributes to the body of literature investigating this aspect of democratic rule. As mentioned earlier, all citizens must have the chance to express their personal views in elections. Furthermore, substantive or thick democracy allows people to make informed choices and display unity to achieve the common good. Therefore, the thin-tick approach is valuable because it sees both approaches to democracy as complementary.

2.1.3. Civil society

The thick-thin approach to democracy implies a significant degree of political participation or cooperation between civil society and the state sector. Put differently, people's political participation is a crucial process in healthy democratic states. Political participation has drawn the interest of researchers as a mechanism that allows citizens and organisations to send signals to the ruling authorities in their countries regarding their political will (Tolbert, McNeal and Smith, 2003). Before discussing political participation, this section conceptualises civil society. Although governance encompasses more actors than just civil society, such as the state and private sectors, this study focuses primarily on civil society. Nonetheless, as I mentioned earlier, civil society and the state sector are tightly interlinked, which is why I also incorporate the role of the Cambodian government in the analysis of digital democracy.

A strong and healthy civil society is a vital and distinctive trait of democratic regimes that ensure their survival (Carothers and Barndt, 1999). Civil society strengthens democratic governance by offering people equal rights and opportunities to exercise collective self-determination and political consent (Scholte, 2002), making governance participatory, transparent, consultative, and publicly accountable. Moreover, civil society holds public officials and servants responsible for their actions (Malena, Forster and Singh, 2004). Therefore, civil society is a mechanism that prevents the state sector from becoming disproportionately influential over civil society (Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2015). In the frame of a thin-thick approach to democracy, a robust civil society is vital because it creates horizontal structures of governance that thicken democracy, making it more substantive.

Carothers and Barndt (1999) define civil society as "a domain parallel to but separate from the state – a realm where citizens associate according to their interests and wishes" (p.18). Their definition unveils two crucial theoretical considerations in the conceptualisation of civil society. First, individuals create associations and networks (Atibil, 2012) that differentiate themselves from the state sector, market, and family – although they might overlap in some respects (Edwards, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2013). Over time, the term civil society has evolved. Currently, it is "recognised as a diverse and ever-wider ecosystem of individuals, communities and organisations" (Cooper, 2018, p.5), which comprises associational platforms and countless groups that can serve general or specific purposes and can bring together large groups of citizens or just a handful of them (World Economic Forum, 2013). Civil society groups vary in form, structure, function, and even geographical coverage. They include NGOs, INGOs, online groups and organisations and communities, movements of collective actions, religious groups, labour unions, social entrepreneurs, grassroots associations, youth clubs,

independent media outlets, or the academic sector (Scholte, 2002; World Economic Forum, 2013). This study acknowledges that civil society encompasses a nearly endless variety of members. That is why, as I will explain in greater detail in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3), primary data comes from the views of a wide range of civil society actors like NGO workers, everyday citizens, and activists to include as many views as possible from participants with different backgrounds.

As Carothers and Barndt (1999) note, civil society is separate from the state sector. Still, these two are interlinked. Before, I have conceptualised thick democracy as a process that enables the smoother vertical relationship between civil society agents and the state. This study primarily focuses on civil society, although the state sector remains vital to understand people's political participation in the digital era. The state sector is a crucial locus of power in democratic systems, consisting of "a set of hierarchical structures" (Lane, 2000, p.1) to form the local, state, and central governments or traditional state apparatus (Erkkilä, 2007). Accordingly, the state apparatus encompasses the ruling party and all opposition parties since the electorate has elected them. However, post-authoritarian and illiberal regimes might display a different configuration. For example – and as I will explain in greater detail later – Cambodia's ruling party CPP has controlled all 125 seats in Cambodia's National Assembly since the latest national elections in 2018. Nonetheless, the CPP's landslide victory resulted from the 2017 political crackdown, which I examine in Chapter 5. This specific configuration of Cambodia's National Assembly is relevant because since no opposition party has representation in the National Assembly – they are not part of the state apparatus – I consider opposition political parties as civil society agents.

All in all, civil society entails a broad range of types of associations that people create, which are separate from other stakeholders like the state or private firms and include a wide range of actors. This study reflects that incorporating civil society as a different sector from the state, with whom it has strong links. Therefore, the analysis of civil society in this study also makes numerous references to the state sector. Moreover, in this thesis, I mirror the various agents that make up civil society and engage with actors like everyday citizens, media professionals, or NGO workers to collect a wide range of views from civil society and see how actors interact.

The second theoretical consideration to the conceptualisation of civil society is that civil society can be defined regarding the functions it develops. Edwards (2014) groups them into three categories. First, it extends associational life. Civil society creates relational and uncoerced networks based on tolerance and cooperation with the state sector. Second, it builds a good society around shared values to achieve the common good. To achieve it, context, and collaboration with other sectors like the state are essential. Third, it strengthens the public sphere – earlier, I have defined it as the arena where

citizens form publics and reach agreements to generate integrated new views (Habermas, 1991). The public sphere is vital because it creates dialogues that result in stronger opinions that legitimate authority and facilitate achieving the common will (Rutherford, 2000). Therefore, civil society is also a mechanism through which ideas, interests and values are formed, voiced, and made politically influential (Habermas, 1991). These three characteristics of civil society – associational life, common good, and a robust public sphere – are vital to develop thick democracy and make informed choices. This thesis incorporates digital media to explore how it contributed to making democracy more substantial.

As Edwards (2014) notes, these three views on the functions of civil society can be too abstract. In this case, civil society can be analysed through a "practical mode" (Jensen, 2006, p.53) to include the specific contextual settings of each case. "Civil society theorists working in the practical mode are primarily informed by a particular socio-political context. Their work reflects the problems found in the democratic political culture of a specific nation-state" (ibid). The practical mode mirrors the centrality of the thin-thick approach to democracy. A robust civil society results in relational networks and cooperation to generate public opinion that, ultimately, informs multi-party elections. That, of course, must consider the specific contextual settings of each case. So, the normative conceptualisation of civil society is helpful only to a certain extent. Accordingly, this study uses the case of Cambodia to explore specific elements that characterise its civil society in post-authoritarian regimes and its interaction with the state sector. More specifically, this thesis considers the culture of political fear and lack of trust among civil actors, more on which in section 2.3 and throughout chapters 4, 5, and 6.

2.1.4. Political participation

As I outlined earlier, civil society is crucial in democracy because it facilitates political participation. Scholarly literature defines political participation as a set of voluntary actions individuals perform to shape governmental policies (Bong and Sen, 2017; van Deth, 2016; Whiteley, 2005) through institutionalised actions like elections and less systematic activities like deliberation in forums. Participation is crucial in democracy because it allows civil society to deliberate on the policy-making process that affects individual and collective decisions and redistributes the roles in governance, thus affecting the power dynamics with the state sector (ibid). There is a fair degree of consensus in the literature that participation is a vital indicator of the vibrance and quality of democracy, thus making it a key indicator to measure its success (Barnes, 1999; Dryzek and List, 2003; van Deth, 2016).

Ultimately, participation allows members of the public to express their political views and contribute to shaping public institutions. So, political participation is a strategy to keep governments accountable (Dahl, 1998; Verba and Nie, 1987).

Michels and De Graaf (2010) highlight that participation is also a pedagogical tool that promotes people's civil skills to make informed decisions. Moreover, it has an integrative function. It makes people feel part of their governance system and legitimises their political views. Therefore, political participation is an empowerment mechanism or "giving citizens influence" (Michels and De Graaf, 2010, p.488) in governance. Political influence is defined as the "capacity to modify the behaviour of decision-makers in a political arena" (Arts and Verschuren, 1999, p.142). In this thesis, the term *influence* is significant because, following the thin-thick approach to democracy, it can be exerted through people's votes in multi-party elections and through alternative and substantive means like deliberation.

The definition of political participation invites the reflection on several issues. First, participation is a *voluntary* act. People are not obliged to engage in politics, and if they do, participation must be uncoerced. The second issue concerns what counts as political participation. Different scholars (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004; Teorell, Torcal and Montero, 2007; Verba and Nie, 1987) have created different dimensions of political engagement. Verba and Nie (1987) identify four dimensions of participation. First is the individualistic dimension (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004), which involves local and national elections. Second, taking part in campaigns such as attending rallies or donating money to persuade others. Third, contracting officials and politicians seeking private or collective benefits (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004; Verba and Nie, 1987). While the second and third dimensions could still count as individual actions, they already involve other individuals (politicians). Fourth, engaging in collective activities often results in new and extended citizen networks or social capital (Putnam, 2000), influencing state policies at a local and state level. For example, associations created around a shared topic of interest – a political party, for instance.

Mcleod, Scheufele and Moy (1999) further distinguish between traditional and non-traditional participation. The former is made of institutionalised engagement – voting and contacting politicians – while the latter is less institutionalised and concerns actions like attending meetings or being a member of an organisation. The distinction between these two categories matters to the thin and thick approaches to democracy. On the one hand, traditional participation like voting reinforces a thin approach to democracy, which sees democracy as a procedure to select people's political representatives. On the other hand, non-traditional participation like political deliberation reinforces a thick view on democracy, thus as a continuous process that requires civil society's active political

engagement. Altogether, the implication for democracy – the overarching concept of this thesis – is significant. Since I emphasise thick democracy in this study, the role of non-traditional political engagement is vital, although the link between traditional and non-traditional engagement is also considered.

Second, political participation is *not* a static concept. Thus, how people engage in politics responds to the changing political environment. The arrival of digital media had tremendous implications for political participation. It challenged its scope and gave further insights into what constitutes traditional and non-traditional participation (Lilleker, 2014). More importantly, it stressed that participation is in constant transformation (Vissers and Stolle, 2014). The internet made the repertoire of possibilities to engage in politics more comprehensive, reshaped traditional forms of engagement and contributed to an era of "DYI politics" (Bennett, 2012, p.12). With digital media playing an increasingly important role in the political scene, the boundary between political and non-political actions has become more blurred (van Deth, 2016; Vissers and Stolle, 2014). Given the crucial role of new technology in the political arena, this thesis makes an original contribution to the literature focusing on how new forms of political engagement interact with existing non-traditional types of participation, and whether they happen exclusively in the online sphere or interact with the offline sphere – section 2.2 explores digital democracy in greater detail.

Third, participation glimpses a power relationship between actors in governance – as I explained earlier, this thesis focuses on civil society and the state sector. Dahl's (1957) classic paper The Concept of Power conceptualises power as one's capacity to get another party to do something they would not otherwise do. That is a very comprehensive definition of power that has been criticised because it does not capture people's capacity to shape norms and values to get what they want (Lukes, 2004). Still, what power is and does – the ability to achieve something – is still valid. In the political arena, power is a medium that creates the capacity to ensure that binding obligations within the political system are carried out "and legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals" (Parsons, 1963, p.237). Accordingly, people engage in political actions to manifest the power or capacity to shape public institutions, endorse legitimacy, and check on the powers of the state. In this thesis, political power and participation are tightly interlinked. Political engagement is conceptualised as projecting political power, which can vary in form. Furthermore, it is voluntary and non-static. Although new technology offers new ways to project political power, this study also considers offline forms of participation, stressing that online and offline participation are interlinked.

2.1.5. Imperfect democracies

Even though democracy puts people at the core of the political process, democracy is far from being perfect (Dewey, 1927; Moore, 1994). Dahl (1982) gives a practical example regarding the distribution of political power. From a normative standpoint, a perfect democracy would require all actors to have equal political power. However, institutions usually exercise their influence more effectively and efficiently, and even if all citizens had the same amount of power, some might choose not to use it. Therefore, the study of democracy entails a descriptive approach beyond its normative conceptualisation (the *ideal* democracy) to examine how democratic societies *do* work in practice (Cunningham, 2002).

Flexibility is critical to identify democratic flaws and look for solutions, although "without assuming that all social problems can be adequately solved in this way or that a perfect democracy could ever be achieved. Flexibility means such things as looking to find democratic solutions specific to the circumstances of a problem" (Cunningham, 2002, p.148). Therefore, the perfect democracy is an ideal form of government that, in practice, is *relative* and imperfect (Dewey, 1927 in Cunningham, 2002). In other words, democracy should not be seen in absolute terms.

> One can value democracy while recognizing that it might sometimes be in conflict with other values and that it might never be perfectly realized. Democracy on this view is an ideal in the sense of being a model by reference to which alternative (imperfect) democracy enhancing practices and institutions might be identified (Cunningham, 2002, p.144).

As Cunningham indicates, one society might promote one type of freedom that implies downgrading another liberty and still be called a democratic society. This flexibility complements the intrinsic value of substantive democracy, which distances itself from using rigid benchmarks and criteria to distinguish between democracies and non-democracies (McGlinchey, 2010) – Huntington's (1993) analysis of the third wave of democratisation was criticised because of this reason (Diamond, 2015b; McGlinchey, 2010).

As I explained earlier, democracy being context-sensitive is crucial to understand democratic imperfections. Democratic governance cannot be isolated from specific historical and social circumstances that determine the context of democratic expansions and contractions (Macpherson, 2011). The latest period of democratic growth was seen in the third wave of democratisation when several countries gained or improved their democratic rights – even if Huntington's (1993) rigid

method to analyse it was criticised. Contrary to the third wave, periods of democratic contraction, "autocratisation" (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019, p.1095), or periods of "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016, p.5), are not infrequent. They consist of the "decline of democratic regime attributes" (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019, p.1095) that turn countries away from the ideal of democracy (Bermeo, 2016).

The fact that some autocratic regimes that went through the third wave of democracy have not fully democratised offers meaningful insights. First, it restricts Fukuyama's (1989) optimism for a global and almost full democratic transition after the Cold War in the 1990s. Second, it shows that some countries have consolidated their position in the grey zone between democracy and autocracy, rather that being in a constant state of democratic transition that was never fully achieved. Scholarly literature has named them "hybrid regimes" (Bogaards, 2009, p.339; Wigell, 2008, p.230). However, Levitsky and Way (2002) argue that this is a very optimistic way of analysing regimes in the grey area since "hybrid regime" suffers from a democratising bias. Put differently, it implies that regimes in the grey area between autocracy and democracy are transitional regimes and will, eventually, become democratic regimes.

To address the democratising bias, the term "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way, 2002, p.52) is proposed. This term addresses the democratising bias stressing that some regimes are not actually transitioning to democracy and, instead, effectively utilise democratic mechanism to legitimate an existing autocratic regime. Therefore, a competitive authoritarian regime is, in practice, a diminished form of authoritarianism (Linz, 2000). "In competitive authoritarian regimes, formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such extent, however, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy" (Levitsky and Way, 2002, p.52). That is normally due to external pressure because of an international system that is relatively intolerant to dictatorial regimes (Levitsky and Way, 2020). Therefore, incumbents dilute democratic leadership using subtle methods like co-optation and prosecution of political opposition, and harassment of critics in the shadow of meaningful democratic institutions, thus resulting in a remarkable power imbalance between government and opposition forces (ibid). With the case study of Cambodia, this thesis emphasises that Cambodia has become a competitive authoritarian regime despite of the great emphasis that was put in its democratic transition in the 1990s with the establishment of the Paris Peace Agreements. Additionally, this study also shows that since 2015, the country has made a further turn towards autocracy (Levitsky and Way, 2020)

The current global democratic recession shows the imperfections of democratic governance. According to Freedom House (2021), 2020 marked the fifteenth consecutive year of a worldwide democratic decline. "The expansion of authoritarian rule, combined with the fading and inconsistent presence of major democracies on the international stage, has had tangible effects on human life and security, including the frequent resort to military force to resolve political disputes" (p.2). Out of the 195 countries included in the study, 82 were labelled as free, 59 as party-free, and 54 as non-free (p.4). Since each country presents unique contextual settings – even if certain commonalities exist between countries – remaining flexible and context-sensitive is critical to understand why democracies can move closer or further away from their normative ideal.

Regardless of the current global democratic crisis, there are good reasons to remain optimistic. Democracy has proved to be a resilient system of governance, capable of rebounding remarkable blows (Freedom House, 2021a) – for instance, the political impact of the COVID-19 pandemic democracies worldwide. Given the benefits of democracy, the popularisation of digital media to practice politics, and the imperfections of democracy, the overarching debate is whether and how digital democracy improves democratic governance. As I will show in the next section, the views of digital proponents and detractors outline many of the current opportunities and challenges of digital democracy. However, while digital democracy is well contextualised in the Western world, "empirical evidence is still insufficient and contradictory to understand the democratizing impact of new technology under illiberal political conditions" (Lee, 2017, p.63).

This section has used democracy as a critical term to introduce civil society and political participation as two critical units of analysis in this study. Civil society and political engagement are central elements in democratic governance, putting it at an advantage against illiberal and autocratic regimes. Moreover, it has also stressed that democracy is an ongoing process that constantly changes, explaining democratic expansion and contraction periods. All these concepts are paramount to introduce digital democracy in the next section. The intersection between digital media and politics exemplifies that democracy is not a static concept and that the popularisation of the internet challenged how civil society engages in politics.

2.2. Digital democracy

Social relations are essential to human life (Antonucci, Ajrouch and Birditt, 2013). The unique social context found in any given social group shapes these relations – especially time and place – resulting in social, economic, and political changes (Ajrouch et al., 2017). Although context is an indispensable element to the creation of unique social relations, it also adds remarkable complexity to their study since they are in constant transformation. In the last few decades, global technological advancement has been seen "as the impetus for the most fundamental of social trends and transformations" (Wajcman, 2002, p.347) that have reshaped people´s social interactions. Debates concerning the socio-political transformation because of the popularisation of the internet and digital technology have been incredibly vibrant concerning the political analysis of illiberal regimes, and questions have been raised concerning the extent to which the internet alters the existing social relations and facilitates the transformation of political spaces (Zheng, 2007). Given the potential of new technology to foster deep social changes and the relative lack of assessment about the factors that enable them, an empirical assessment of the emerging social characteristics in the digital era is necessary to understand why and to what extent our societies are changing (Antonucci, Ajrouch and Manalel, 2017). This thesis does that with an investigation of Cambodia´s illiberal political arena. It assesses non-traditional political participation to explain why digital media has transformed the political interactions of several civil society actors in the country.

As I mentioned earlier, studying social interactions – also in the digital era – is a complex task because the elements that fuel social transformations do not operate in silos. Put differently, there are several interlinked factors related to technology influencing the current social dynamics. These factors are reflected in the convoy model (Antonucci, 2001), which assesses the structure of social relations through the specific individual and situational characteristics found in each scenario. The former category includes, for example, age and gender, while the latter considers roles, norms, and organisations. More importantly, the convoy model stresses that these factors operate in relation to one another. The fact that numerous factors shape social relations is critical in the internet era because, as Wajcman (2002) points out, social relations are not independent from technology: "technology and society are mutually constitutive: both are made of the same stuff – networks linking human beings and non-human entities. The technological, instead of being a sphere separate from society, is part of what makes large-scale society possible" (p.355). Therefore, digital media should not be left in the background of the study of social relations, but rather dealt alongside individuals, governments, and other institutions.

The importance of digital media affects individuals, institutions, and societies alike. On the one hand, new technology moulds personal identities. The "information society" (Wajcman, 2002, p.347), one that is based on information and knowledge, has greatly benefited from the internet greatly since it offers easy access to abundant information, thus creating new opportunities for people to redefine their identify. The implications do not only affect individuals; people´s use of the internet reshapes their identity and results in new social structures that affect numerous social domains (idid). As this thesis shows, that also affects the political scene. The "network society" (Castells, 2009, p. 500) alters the scope of decisions due to the compression of space and time resulting in the basis of new social structures. Castell's explanation of a connected society offers a macro-sociological diagnosis of how society has evolved.

Crucial for this thesis, the network society also explains how the political scene has evolved since connected societies in the digital era have changed the practice of governing too (Bang and Esmark, 2009). This thesis uses the case of Cambodia to explore how a networked society used digital tools and media to transform the country's political landscape. Therefore, the term "digital democracy" (Lindner and Aichholzer, 2020, p.11; Simon, Bass and Boelman, 2017, p.11) or "e-democracy" (Coleman and Norris, 2005, p.6; Freeman and Quirke, 2013, p.144; Norris, 2010, p.339) is a key concept in this study. Like democracy, a universal definition of digital democracy is unlikely due to the complex nature of democracy itself, which encompasses a wide range of actors, processes, and its outcomes can be presented from several angles, as I explained earlier. Digital democracy is not different and concerns the role of actors like civil society and the state sector, participation, accountability, and the public sphere (Simon, Bass and Boelman, 2017).

This study adopts the definitions of Simon, Bass and Boelman (2017) and van Dijk (2012). The former defines digital democracy as "the practice of democracy using digital tools and technologies" (Simon, Bass and Boelman, 2017, p.11). The latter refers to it as "pursuit and the practice of democracy in whatever view using digital media in online and offline political communication" (van Dijk, 2012, p.51). In this thesis, I use the case of Cambodia to investigate how new technology reshapes politics and democracy in post-authoritarian regimes. Understanding the role of digital media in politics is vital because new technology alters how civil society participates in politics – before, I identified civil society and political participation as crucial elements of democratic governance – thus changing the state of democracy. In analysing digital democracy, I consider the opportunities and challenges of new technology to engage in politics. I incorporate the views of digital democracy advocates, who see new technology as a cure to many existing democratic ills, and the views of digital democracy detractors, who present a dystopian idea of new technology and warn us of the challenges of digital media to

participate in politics. Below, I outline both views. Considering the narratives of both opposites is necessary because, as I will show in chapters 4, 5, and 6, digital democracy opportunities and challenges coexist.

2.2.1. The digital democracy advocates

Digital democracy has gained proponents worldwide and contributed to a wave of political optimism that positioned digital media as the means to revitalise democratic systems, cure their ills, and reconfigure the public sphere into a networked mechanism to distribute power more evenly (Kneuer and Datts, 2020). Initially, "the expectation was that the removal of space barriers by ICTs and their central storage capacity would enable forms of direct democracy without intermediaries such as parties and representatives" (van Dijk, 2012, p.50). Later, digital media was expected to create stronger communities (new online communities and digitised existing offline communities), thus giving voice to small and voiceless social groups (Nabatchi and Mergel, 2010; Shirky, 2011). The global spread of the internet and the popularisation of social media platforms like Facebook would allow citizens to shape public policy through online and debates. Still, the internet quickly became a highly interactive sphere where users co-created, shared, and commented on content that contributed to policy-making with petitions or civic journalism (van Dijk, 2012).

"Cyber-utopians", as Morozov (2011, p.xviii) calls them, display an almost "naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside" (ibid). As Kneuer and Datts (Kneuer and Datts, 2020) indicate, advocates focus on the meaning-making opportunity that digital tools provide. At a micro-level, digital democracy empowers individuals through more accessible communication, giving all actors the same opportunities to form public opinion while bypassing traditional media outlets. Moreover, digital media also allows users to generate content and disseminate it – known as "citizen journalism" (Kneuer and Datts, 2020, p.287). Macro-level opportunities highlight a new and global infrastructure on the net that would enable the formation of unique spaces that would increase people's participation in politics (Christiansen, 2012; Dahlgren, 2005; Diamond, 2010; Joseph, 2011) and transcend the role of governments (Castells, 2009; van Dijck, 2013). "On this basis, the potential expansion of the public sphere in terms of deterritorialization and dissolution of boundaries was discussed, implying the expectation of a global virtual agora with digital citizens" (Kneuer and Datts, 2020, p.287). These developments are beneficial to improve the interaction between civil society and the state sector (Kneuer and Datts, 2020) and address people's loss of trust in their political institutions (Coleman and Blumler, 2009).

Examples of the cyber-utopian narrative can be found in the Iranian Green Movement and the Arab Spring. In 2009, the Green Movement sought to overturn the allegedly fraudulent presidential re-election of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. The term "Twitter revolution" (Faris, 2012, p.3) was coined to refer to the discourse that "credited Twitter with everything from organizing the revolt itself to being the only way that Iranians knew what was happening" (ibid). Therefore, social media was seen as the ultimate mechanism to achieve a significant political change. During the Arab Spring, in the early 2010s, the cyber-utopian narrative presented new technology as an instrumentalised mechanism to protest illiberal regimes and overthrow autocrats (Guedoir, 2018; Korany and El-Mahdi (Eds), 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer, 2013).

Like democracy, the distinction between thin and thick digital democracy facilitates analysing the contribution of digital democracy to governance. The thin view of digital democracy highlights digital tools and media's role in improving communication between civil society actors and the state sector. To name one example, citizens have easier access to information, and their interaction with the government improves through online consultations (Simon, Bass and Boelman, 2017). This approach has remarkable parallelisms with the minimalist or procedural view on democracy, emphasising people's role in expressing their individual preferences. In contrast, a thick view on digital democracy stresses the collaborative role of citizens who make their own decisions about governance to influence public institutions (Tuzzi, Padovani and Nesti, 2007). Hence the emphasis on participation and deliberation as a process to make decisions.

Both approaches to democracy, thin and thick, highlight different benefits of digital democracy, which can be encompassed in Dahlberg's (2011) framework. It outlines four positions: liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-publics, and autonomist Marxist digital democracy (p.865). These four positions reflect different benefits of digital democracy. Dahlberg's framework shows that the thin and thick approaches are complementary, thus endorsing Bellamy and Castiglione (2013) thin-thick approach to democracy. The liberal-individualistic view stands close to the thin approach to digital democracy. It sees individuals as self-sufficient, rational, and strategic, focusing on people's personal political views expressed through elections. Therefore, the liberal-individualistic approach stresses democracy's competitive and aggregative value. In the digital era, individuals use new technology to choose, compete, inform, and express their views in elections (Dahlberg, 2011, pp.858–865).

The second approach to digital democracy is the deliberative view. In this case, the internet and social media enhance people's communication and deliberation in the public sphere, so citizens can build informed opinions, thus strengthening their political accountability (p.859). This approach differs from the liberal take on digital democracy since individuals interact rather than act individually, thickening

democracy. Therefore, democracy becomes deliberative and consensual and gives people the opportunity to share information, reflect, argue, (dis)agree with each other, and form new opinions to enhance interactions (p.865).

The third approach to digital democracy is forming counter publics, "rather than rational individual action or rational consensus-oriented deliberation" (p.860). This position brings digital media's capacity to form political groups such as activists to the foreground to contest existing political views. Therefore, the counter-public approach differs from the previous two views because it does not emphasise consensus-oriented deliberation (ibid). Instead, it stresses people's capacity – individually or collectively – to form antagonistic groups, thus becoming a contentious type of democracy. The democratic outputs include new forms to articulate ideas, form groups, contest ideas, or protest (p.865).

The fourth and last take to digital democracy is the autonomist Marxist type. It stresses that digital democracy offers the opportunity to create communication networks that result in self-organised and inclusive political engagement or "radical politics" (p.863) that "bypass centralized state and capitalist systems" (ibid). So, citizens create collaboration networks so their members can share ideas or exchange material goods (second-hand clothes, for example) or non-material goods such as co-created knowledge (Wikipedia would be an example).

All in all, the cyber-utopian view envisions new technology as a crucial factor to expand democratic governance since members of civil society can use digital media to become more politically active, primarily through non-traditional political engagement. This view reinforces the mobilisation theory, which argues that with the obliquity of the internet, inactive cohorts of the population are allowed to participate in politics (Sinpeng, 2017), reinforcing people's centrality in democracy, which becomes thicker and more substantive. This view will be vital to understand civil society's political empowerment in the early 2010s, when new technology allowed many citizens to become more politically active, especially in non-traditional politics. Still, one major flaw with the cyber-utopian view is that it often conflates political mobilisation with the outcome (Faris, 2012). For example, new technology positively influenced political participation in Iran in 2009. However, the Green Movement resulted in the reassertion of despotism, which questioned the transformative capabilities of social media in illiberal contexts supported by cyber-utopians (ibid). In this study, the cyber-utopian view is essential. As I will show, in Cambodia, increased political mobilisation did not translate into a positive political outcome. Below, I present the views of digital democracy detractors who acknowledge the opportunities associated with digital media while warning us of the dangers.

2.2.2. The digital democracy detractors

Digital democracy is not free of criticism. Detractors offer a dystopian view of the internet and its interaction with politics. While they do not necessarily reject the opportunities of digital democracy, they relativise them and stress the more problematic aspects of digital democracy. Below, I address quality of information, filter bubbles, and surveillance as three dominant concerns in the detractors' discourse. It is necessary to identify the challenges of digital democracy to show that they coexist with the opportunities I have explained in the previous section.

A vital characteristic of the digital sphere is that netizens can easily access large volumes of information, which most users tend to filter. When data is too readily available, selective information means that netizens typically select what they read or watch based on their preferences and past experiences (Guess et al., 2018). Hence, the formation of echo chambers or filter bubbles contributes to reaffirming users preconceived ideas (ibid). In terms of political participation, access to a broader selection of information is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, easier access to various sources of information can widen citizens political views and give them more resources to deliberate on political matters, making democracy more substantive. On the other hand, many netizens use the internet to join groups of users with shared values, cutting themselves off from those who can challenge their views and harming democratic dialogue (Sunstein, 2009 in Bozdag and van den Hoven, 2015).

Related to easy access to information, detractors assert that, with the internet, users can support political causes by performing simple measures. However, they might not necessarily be devoted to making a real change happen, resulting in actions with a minimal impact – this is known as *slaktivism* (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011). Users use digital media to engage in trivial actions at the expense of developing organisational skills (Etling, Faris and Palfrey, 2010, p.38). Moreover, clicks, retweets, and shares do not create hierarchical and centralised organisational structures, which is fundamental to achieving meaningful outcomes (Gladwell, 2010; Vong and Hok, 2018).

Surveillance has become a significant concern due to the quantity of personal data stored online, such as internet-based devices and social media accounts (Fuchs (Ed), 2012, pp.3, 20). If governments gather data with political and strategic ends, citizens no longer perceive the net as a safe space (Joseph, 2011; Morozov, 2011), which downplays the benefits of digital democracy. That is especially problematic in authoritarian regimes whose governments often gather data to silence political activists, culprits, or dissenting voices (Castells, 2001; Fuchs (Ed), 2012), compromising people's political liberties. Examples of that are not scarce and include governmental surveillance during the

Irani Green Movement of 2009 (Dabashi, 2011), the monitoring methods used by the Kremlin's watchdog Roskomnadzor (Turovsky, 2015), or the Great Firewall in China (Economy, 2018). The views of digital democracy detractors oppose the mobilisation theory that I have mentioned earlier and align with the reinforcement theory, which sustains that the role of the internet is less meaningful, and individuals become politically engaged if they are previously predisposed to doing so (Sinpeng, 2017).

All in all, a debate on whether digital tools and media enhance *or* harm democracy is not fruitful since digital democracy's opportunities and challenges coexist, even if those might not necessarily overlap in time. Put differently, some specific periods might mirror the possibilities of digital media in the political sphere, while other periods might show their hurdles. For example, there is no doubt that social media fed the revolutions during the Arab Spring in the North of Africa in the early 2010s, which sparked great optimism and anticipated a democratic revolution (Joseph, 2011: 166; Morozov, 2011). However, in the long run, some revolutions in the North of Africa have not resulted in the great political upheaval that was predicted, except for Tunisia (Fraihat and Yaseen, 2020). In some cases, like Egypt, governments have used new technology to restrain people's political drive and ambitions (Shenoy, 2020).

That shows two things. First, although the role of digital media to change the political landscape cannot be ignored, digital tools are not the ultimate solution (Christiansen, 2012; Joseph, 2011). Second, identifying the opportunities that digital democracy offers to overcome democratic shortcomings is a more beneficial approach to assessing digital media's impact on the political landscape (Carothers, 2015). Acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of digital democracy dismisses the assumption that authoritarian states can quickly collapse after information freely penetrates their structures (de Sola Pool, 1973).

This thesis analyses the opportunities *and* challenges associated with new technology to participate in politics in illiberal settings. To better understand the impact of digital democracy, its analysis must consider a relatively long period because, as I explained, its opportunities and challenges are not always visible at the same time. Even if opportunities and challenges cannot be identified in the same period, it is necessary to explore how they are related. For example, I will show that digital democracy opportunities in Cambodia were noticeable in the early 2010s, while the challenges became evident in the latter half of that decade. Still, opportunities and challenges were strongly interlinked.

Exploring opportunities and challenges of digital democracy allows addressing other debates that remain underexplored in the literature. One of these debates is how online and offline political activity are related and result in new political attitudes (Carothers, 2015; Marichal, 2013; Sinpeng, 2017).

regardless of the digitalisation of the political sphere, offline politics remain vital. That is why there is an essential discussion on the relationship between online and offline participation. Scholarly literature distinguishes between exclusive activities to the offline *or* online sphere and those that happen in both arenas (Vissers and Stolle, 2014). While research has found that online participation is a distinctive type of participation (Oser, Hooghe and Marien, 2013), those who practice it are not disconnected from the offline arena (ibid) – research has found that increased online political activity often translated into offline political action (Kaminchenko, 2020; Lane et al., 2017).

This presents one challenge: establishing how political participation using new technology complements analogue forms of political engagement. Some studies point out that the political environment – circumstantial context – matters to understand the link between online and offline participation. For example, many Taiwanese young citizens who used the internet during the protests of the Sunflower Movement in 2014 also voted in elections. However, that was not the case in elections in 2012 and 2016 (Chang, 2019). Therefore, given the relevance of context, it is necessary to identify the specific contextual elements influencing people's political engagement and how these have changed in the digital era. This thesis uses political fear and distrust to explore political participation in illiberal regimes in the digital age.

2.3. Political fear and lack of trust in post-authoritarian regimes

As I explained earlier, context is highly relevant in democratic analysis. A post-authoritarian regime is a country that demised authoritarian rule (Heryanto and Hadiz, 2005) and has established a new democratic system or is in the process of doing so (Mishler and Rose, 2001). Regardless of the democratic structures like the rule of law or separation of powers that might be in place, some countries also show structural deficiencies like limited civil and political liberties or difficulties in containing corruption or social forces that weaken their democratic system of governance (Abinales, 2005), which undermines the quality of a democratic system. According to Barber (2009), a weak democratic state lacks one of the following core elements: political participation or the strong democratic rule of law. If they lack the former, people's involvement is not decisive since they do not have the chance to select their representatives. If they lack the latter, people lack opportunities to make up their political opinions and make informed choices in elections. Thus, a weak democratic state displays thin *or* thick democracy. For example, even if a post-authoritarian country establishes democratic mechanisms like separation of powers and celebrates multi-party elections, but citizens do not enjoy political freedoms, the democratic implementation will be weak.

Cambodia is an example of a post-colonial and post-authoritarian regime with a weak implementation of a democratic system, established in 1991 with the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) – I provide a deeper historical analysis in Chapter 4. With the PPA, the central state achieved nearly complete control of the Cambodia territory, and the domestic economy developed – stateness and economic performance both scored 8 out of 10 (BTI, 2020). Still, even if democratic institutions exist as stipulated by the constitution, their stability has been weak – they scored 2 out of 10 – and Cambodia has become a one-party country with a poor implementation of the democratic rule of law and an executive that dominates the political system (ibid). This example shows that democracy is a slow process that often leaves countries – even "old" democracies – far in a position far from the ideal of a democratic regime.

Understanding the social and political characteristics of each case study is vital to gain knowledge about democratic transitions. In post-authoritarian regimes, political fear and lack of trust are common (Koonings and Kruijt (Eds), 1999; Mishler and Rose, 2001), which inform the state of their democracies. Next section analyses how people's political fear and lack of social and political trust impacts democracy in post-authoritarian regimes. Incorporating these elements in the discussion is essential because, as the analytical chapters show, fear and lack of trust are crucial elements in understanding Cambodia's political scene and researching digital democracy. So, considering fear and trust is a way to evaluate the specific contextual settings of illiberal regimes and expand knowledge on digital democracy outside the Western world (Lee, 2017).

2.3.1. Fear and political participation

Fear is one of our most basic emotions (Adolphs, 2013), a psychological response to a dangerous or threatening situation to increase people's chances of survival (Glassner, 1999; LeDoux, 1998; Öhman, 1993). Therefore, fear serves as a mechanism that helps people adapt to challenging situations, which can be a person or an experience in the present or past (Bar-Tal, 2001).

Fear has been widely used in politics. State authorities have exploited its effects to manipulating and controlling people to ensure the dominance of the political class. The politics of fear (Altheide, 2006; Castells, 2018; Stocchetti, 2007; Wodak, 2015), or culture of fear (Alves, 1990), consists of using a specific situation to induce fear among people and then exploit its effects to obtain popular submission and political benefit. This strategy emphasises people's collective vulnerabilities to external threats such as terrorism or social, economic, and political divergences that divide people in a community (Castells, 2018; Furedi, 2007; Higgs, 2005; Robin, 2004). It can apply to a myriad of

circumstances. In warfare situations, real threats inherent to war are often used to induce fear among people. Nonetheless, in peaceful states, the political class can also fabricate fear to obtain popular control – for example, using threats regarding terrorism to scare people (Robin, 2004). In both cases, fear becomes "a means to legitimise an intensify an apparatus of repression" (Gregory and Pred (Eds), 2007, p.1) that demagogue and populist leaders use to create social tension, increase their popularity and, ultimately, obtain political power (DEMOS, 2017; Robin, 2004; Schmid, 2005; Stocchetti, 2007). Over the years, fear has been used in such diverse situations until it became another element in public life (Füredi, 2006). For example, in Russia, local authorities have instrumentalised fear to achieve political control, recalls the Soviet period, when overt intimidation or regime critics or harassment of opposition activists was familiar (Gel'man, 2015).

Defending the benefits of democracy in fearful societies can be challenging. In post-authoritarian societies and weak democracies, fear is a crucial element because hegemonic groups often exploit the vulnerabilities of other groups and create "landscapes of fear" (Clouser, 2009, p.7). Political elites tend to use high-profile cases to influence people's beliefs and assumptions to create a situation of fear (Clouser, 2009; Tuan, 2013) that suits the interests of the political class so that their members can remain politically dominant (Altheide, 2006; Füredi, 2006). For example, in Cambodia, the narrative of state authorities often contains references to the Khmer Rouge, which are then linked to opposition parties to induce fear and undermine their credibility. The Government conveys that Cambodia could go back to a state of war should an opposition party rule the country. This strategy is particularly effective because many people are still traumatised by decades of violent conflict or because the elderly have transmitted fear to younger generations (Chhim, 2012, 2013). Therefore, understanding fear requires grasping Cambodia's local historical context to figure out what (people or a situation) is causing fear, how people react to it, and how it shapes the political landscape.

Fear determines how people participate in politics (Brader and Marcus, 2013). People's political engagement adapts to landscapes of fear where societies fight against themselves or outside forces searching for social and political order. That might influence some people's honest engagement and adhesion to ethical responsibilities (Koonings and Kruijt (Eds), 1999), undermining thick democracy (Clouser, 2009; Shi, 2001). However, not all citizens in weak and post-authoritarian countries are afraid of politics, and pockets of resistance to the politics of illiberal governments are not uncommon. For instance, new media in Cambodia created new spaces of political emancipation that resulted in new social movements (Beban, Schoenberger and Lamb, 2020) and, as this thesis shows, in members of civil society who found new ways to engage in politics regardless of the governmental pressure on people's political liberties.

Different bodies of literature reach different conclusions about fear and participation. Some scholars (Dammert, 2012; Vasilopoulos, 2018) correlate fear with low levels of political participation. They argue that citizens show limited political ambitions due to fear, are less politically engaged, and censor their views. However, another sector of the literature (Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009) argues that survivors of traumatising experiences are more likely to participate in politics, especially electoral politics (Bali, 2007; Rose, Murphy and Abrahms, 2007). Given these differences in the literature, considering *what type* of participation fear affects is critical.

As I have shown in section 2.1.4, voting is just one form of political engagement. Since this thesis emphasises the importance of substantive democracy, it pays particular attention to how fear affects non-traditional political participation. Some scholars observe that survivors of frightening experiences are more likely to become politically active in non-electoral forms of participation, in roles that reassemble those of social and political activists (Bateson, 2012; Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009). Scholars who find a positive link between survivors and increased participation appeal to several factors to explain it. Those who go through traumatic experiences develop a sense of personal strength, which they express through enhanced political participation (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004). Another reason is that survivors engage in politics to channel their anger (Bateson, 2012). All these theses on fear and participation gravitate around survivors' *past* experiences with fear.

However, people's *present* relationship with fear also matters to figure out how they participate in politics. Therefore, the current political environment must be considered. For example, citizens who experienced traumatising experiences in the past might be willing to engage in politics. Still, their fears about future events and insecurities might prevent them from doing so (Ley Gutierrez, 2014). As Pearce (2007) notes, fear of violence limits civil society's associative actions, making political mobilisation unlikely

All in all, the literature on the politics of fear leads to two outcomes. First, each case study has singularities that must be considered to understand the intersection between fear and participation. That will result in many arguments about fear and political engagement that are case-specific. Nonetheless, research outputs are transferrable to other countries or societies. Second, the discussion shifted from *whether* fear strengthens *or* weakens participation to understanding *how* fear shapes participation. This makes political participation a more comprehensive and inclusive concept that embraces non-traditional forms of engagement and citizens in the background of the political scene.

In this thesis, I will consider how political fear in Cambodia shapes political participation in the digital era. The changing nature of political engagement in the digital age has broadened people's horizons

to engage in politics. However, as I mentioned earlier, literature on political participation in post-authoritarian and illiberal regimes is relatively underexplored (Lee, 2017). This thesis will fill this gap using the Cambodia case to explore the roles of political fear and new technologies concerning participation. Incorporating fear and new technology in the analysis is necessary because, as I have shown, they can determine how people engage in politics – with the differentiation between traditional and non-traditional participation being particularly relevant. The intersection between fear, political participation and digital media has barely been explored. Given the importance of fear in weak democracies, it is essential to be incorporated in the study of digital media and political participation, as will be done in this thesis.

2.3.2. Trust and political participation

In the political realm, trust exists when people positively perceive their government and are confident that the political system will meet their expectations (Easton, 1965; Miller, 1974; Citrin, 1974; Hetherington, 1998). In other words, trust develops when citizens perceive that their interests are aligned with those of the government (Bouckaert and van de Walle, 2003; Festenstein, 2020), which entails an element of risk and vulnerability since people trust someone else in a situation of relative uncertainty. "Trust would not be needed if actions could be undertaken with complete certainty; uncertainty regarding whether the other intends to, and will, act appropriately, is the source of the risk" (Hudson, 2004, p.77). Therefore, trust entails dealing with how other people's freedoms align with our expectations.

This conceptualisation above refers to political trust (Newton, 2001; Putnam, 2000), which Ma and Yan (2014) define as "individual's beliefs about the reliability, truthfulness, or capability of political organizations, institutions, regimes, and political actors" (p.325). Trust can also be top-down when government officials trust citizens (Bouckaert, 2012; Van de Walle and Lahat, 2017). In contrast, social trust refers to horizontal structures of trust that reflect people's confidence in their social community (Zmerli and Hooghe (Eds), 2011). From the lens of democracy, vertical and horizontal trust creates a dynamic and fluid relationship between civil society agents. On the one hand, trust allows interpersonal relationships to flourish (Aghion et al., 2010), resulting in horizontal social networks and structures that characterise civil society, which thickens democracy since they promote participation beyond elections. On the other hand, trust also enables institutional relationships between civil society and the state sector (ibid). So, trust is essential to develop civility (Pettit, 2005) so civil society can engage in traditional and non-traditional forms of political participation. In practice, civil society

can display one of the two types, both or none of them (Aghion et al., 2010). Providing context is vital to understand how trust develops (Zmerli and Hooghe (Eds), 2011) since it is subjective and volatile (Burton, 1966; Festenstein, 2020). Therefore, generalisations on the dynamics of trust might be challenging to formulate.

Two approaches explain the origins of trust. First, the institutional theory claims that political trust is based on institutional performance (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Ma and Yang, 2014; Mishler and Rose, 2001). Therefore, people show higher levels of trust when the quality of governmental institutions is higher. On the other hand, the cultural perspective asserts that trust originates in cultural norms, thus in people's beliefs outside the political arena (Mishler and Rose, 2001). These two views are not necessarily in opposition to each other as it is not uncommon to identify elements of both approaches in the analysis of the origins of trust (Ma and Yang, 2014). Therefore, understanding the context of each case is vital to identify where trust originates.

Trust is another of the pillars of democratic governance tightly linked to participation. It is a proxy of legitimacy that indicates to what extent people are willing to participate in politics and express their support for their government, showing how easy or difficult it will be for the state apparatus to implement new policies (Ma and Yang, 2014). Moreover, higher levels of trust make electoral contests more stable (Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2020). Trust is also essential to consolidate a substantive democracy. Political trust fosters respect towards opposition parties or groups who are not aligned with the state authorities – hence their survival – and social trust contributes to ensuring smooth inter-communal relations (ibid). Therefore, trust is a non-instrumental asset to democratic governance because it represents a valuable moral that allows people to recognise and respect the agency of others (Festenstein, 2020).

Like fear, a fundamental debate is how trust affects democratic participation. Trust fosters social harmony and order, decreasing the need for coercive strategies (Festenstein, 2020; Hudson, 2004; Lenard, 2016; OECD, 2013). That is why part of the literature sustains that in a situation of trust between the government and the governed, participation increases because the latter is more likely to engage in politics without freely and without coercion, thus legitimising the political system and contributing to its sustainability (Burton, 1966; Conge et al., 1988). This view is backed by the outcomes of other studies that demonstrate that low levels of trust lead to decreased political participation (Norris, 2011; Nye, 1997).

So, debates about trust and increased or decreased participation remain inconclusive – like those on fear and participation. Recent studies have shifted their attention to the link between trust and non-

traditional forms of engagement, a relationship to which little attention had been paid. Eden and Katsanidou (2014) endorse the thesis that trust strengthens *traditional* participation. Still, other studies contradict their views and claim that more trust leads to passive citizens who are less politically engaged (Goldfinch, Gauld and Herbison, 2009). Nonetheless, both studies argue that low levels of trust lead to increased non-traditional participation. So, the "political disenchantment" (Eder and Katsanidou, 2014, p.83) that some people experience does not negatively impact participation since people might engage in non-traditional forms of involvement. Crucial to this study, digital media's impact on the link between trust and non-traditional political engagement is still underexplored.

All in all, trust is vital to understand political participation. However, literature has focused more on understanding its origins rather than exploring *how* trust – or its lack – impacts political participation, especially in developing countries and post-authoritarian regimes (Clouser, 2009; Dodsworth and Cheeseman, 2020; Shi, 2001). This thesis expands knowledge on trust and participation by incorporating digital media's role in the discussion and by focusing on *how* digital democracy changed trust and participation, especially non-traditional participation. Moreover, since fear and trust are crucial factors in weak democracies (Offe, 2001), exploring the link between the two can help expand knowledge about digital media's capabilities to consolidate democracy in post-authoritarian regimes.

This section has shown that political fear and lack of trust are two elements that characterise governance in post-authoritarian states and weak democracies. Both have been identified as elements that influence political participation in different ways. However, studies using specific aspects of the domestic political context to explain how fear and trust shape participation in the digital era are still scarce. This study will incorporate political fear and trust as vital elements in post-authoritarian and illiberal regimes to expand knowledge about digital democracy and political participation. In the next section, I show that being context-sensitive can lead to a better understanding of democratic consolidation in post-authoritarian regimes.

2.4. Consolidating democracy in Cambodia in the digital era

So far, in this chapter, I have argued that the advantage of democracy over illiberal and autocratic regimes is civil society's central role in governance. Civil society actors benefit from active political participation to forge strong networks among themselves and the state sector to become politically influential. In post-authoritarian regimes, contextual elements like political fear and lack of trust have challenged people's political engagement. However, more research is needed to evaluate how digital

media influences people's political fear, lack of trust, and political participation. This section brings all these items together under the term democratic consolidation, exploring how digital media can strengthen democracy in weak states.

Democratic consolidation is tightly linked to democratisation, a complex process of indefinite length that countries and societies experience when they move towards a more democratic system. To do so, they might need other elements – which act as complements – like human rights and the rule of law (Daly, 2017). Literature on democratisation theory identifies two concepts: transition and consolidation. The first field, transition to democracy, relies on a minimalist approach to democracy and sees elections as the first stepping-stone towards building a democratic society (Elliott, 1994; Schumpeter and Swedberg, 2005). "Thus, the most common approach in the political science literature to delimiting this phase of democratisation is to chart its beginning and end on the basis of pivotal moments related to a democratic electoral process" (Daly, 2017, p.36). This view on democratisation became widely popular in the last three decades of the 20th century with the third wave of democratisation (Huntington, 1993) and the breakdown of the Soviet bloc in 1989.

The second field, consolidation of democracy, more disputed compared to transition to democracy (Daly, 2017), and it is the field that this thesis engaged with the most. The root cause of the disagreement on what constitutes democratic consolidation is what elements are considered once the transition has begun – since regimes evolve following different patterns. Each develops unique particularities (ibid). The thin-thick view of democracy is, once again, applicable to examine democratisation. A thin approach to democracy places free and fair elections as the cornerstone to assess the consolidation of democracy. For example, Huntington (1993) argues that democracy consolidates when there have been two successful power transitions between the ruling party and opposition (Huntington, 1993), and Linz (1990) sustains that consolidation happens when elections and people's rights have been institutionalised. Then, democratic governance becomes the only system of government in a political unit. In both cases, electoral democracy is the pillar of democratic consolidation. The challenge with the thin approach is the over-simplification of democratic consolidation. It is a dichotomous approach that relies on the celebration and consolidation of electoral systems. Moreover, weak democratic governments can build democratic façades that hide illiberal practices (Zakaria, 1997).

Advocates of the thick take on democratisation contemplate free and fair elections as a vital element to evaluate democratic consolidation. Moreover, and more crucially, they also highlight the prevalence of the rule of the law and civil and political rights to assess the consolidation of democracy (Dahl, 2000). That encompasses political inclusivity, freedom of expression and association, or

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alternative sources of information (ibid). Through the lens of the thick approach, democratic consolidation contemplates several variables that are usually less dichotomous, open to interpretation, and challenging to measure than electoral processes. In parallel to the emphasis on thick democracy that I have stressed in the earlier stages of this chapter, this thesis also adopts a thick approach to democratic consolidation to explore the impact of digital democracy. As Daly (2017) notes,

> democratic consolidation can be analysed in a negative and a positive sense. In a negative sense, the objective is to identify signs of threatened backsliding from electoral democracy to authoritarianism, whether by the "slow death" of successive authoritarian advances and a weakening of the existing democratic structures ("democratic decay" or "deconsolidation"), resulting in a repressive façade democracy, or by the "quick death" of a coup, invasion, or other crisis; and to ascertain with some confidence when a new democracy could be expected to persist into the future (p.38).

So, building on Daly's observations, in a positive sense, democratic consolidation refers to the improvement or "deepening" (p.39) of a democratic system, moving from electoral democracy to liberal and advanced democracy, emphasising civil and political rights. As I have explained in the conceptualisation of democracy, the thick approach values the intrinsic benefits of democracy. Therefore, democratic consolidation is a never-ending process.

Democratic consolidation is not free of criticism. Its model uses a standard and Western view on democracy, ignoring that alternative approaches to democracy exist. Moreover, not all countries develop and consolidate their democratic systems simultaneously; each case study shows unique historical, social and political circumstances that influence their democratic development (Schmitter, 1992). It also fails to bring post-authoritarian and illiberal states into the discussion. More often than not, their transition and consolidation is not straightforward and remain in a "grey area" (Diamond, 2002, p.23) between the perfect democracy and autocracy (Daly, 2017). These "hybrid regimes" (Bogaards, 2009, p.339; Wigell, 2008, p.230) demonstrate that democratic consolidation varies from case to case (Bollen, 2009, p.369). So, classifying countries according to their democratic progress (Bogaards, 2009; Diamond, 2015a; McGlinchey, 2010) rather than labelling them as democratic or non-democratic allows for a deeper analysis of democratic consolidation. This thesis makes an original contribution to digital democracy with an analysis of fear and political participation in the digital age to determine the opportunities and challenges of new technology to consolidate democratic governance in illiberal regimes like Cambodia.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has brought to the foreground the main concepts that this thesis utilises to analyse digital democracy. It has highlighted the importance of building a thin-thick approach to democracy, emphasising participatory processes (thick democracy) that can inform elections (thin democracy). Civil society and political participation are two vital elements of the thin-tick model of democratic governance. A robust civil society is necessary to keep the government accountable and build solid networks separate from the state sector. Horizontal social structures facilitate participating in politics and making informed decisions through elections (traditional participation) and other actions such as protesting or participation in public forums (non-traditional participation).

The popularisation of new technology has altered political participation, allowing citizens to engage more readily in political actions beyond voting. Still, the reasons making that possible and its impact on the democratic consolidation in illiberal settings are underexplored. In this investigation, I make an original contribution to the literature with an analysis of political fear and engagement in post-authoritarian and illiberal regimes in the digital age. Context determines the reach of challenges and opportunities, which differ from case to case. In illiberal settings, political fear and distrust influenced political participation much before the digital era. In this investigation, I incorporate new technology in the intersection between fear, trust, and political participation. Furthermore, this study analyses digital democracy through the lens of democratic consolidation. Most studies concerning digital democracy have analysed the rise of digital media in the first half of the 2010s. However, literature incorporating the political crackdown of 2017 regarding social media and the previous democratic empowerment is lacking. Mixing periods of democratic expansion and contraction allow for a more comprehensive analysis of digital democracy in the country to evaluate democratic consolidation through new technology.

3. Research design

This chapter explains the study's research strategy to investigate digital democracy in Cambodia. It links the conceptual part of the study that frames the core concepts and research problem (Chapter 1 and 2) with the empirical and analytical part of the thesis (Chapter 4, 5, 6, and 7) and explains how I generated, collected, analysed raw data to build a coherent narrative that complements existing scholarly literature. In this chapter, I also stress that the research design resulted from a series of *choices* that I considered appropriate to accomplish the aim of the study. Other researchers in the same discipline *could have* built an alternative research design and generate meaningful research outputs. Nonetheless, my choices align with my way of seeing the world as a researcher and are appropriate to identify specific contextual elements that influence digital democracy.

This chapter has three parts. The first covers the methodological framework, where I consider the study's inductive reasoning and qualitative approach. The second part comprises data sources. It justifies the selection of in-depth, semi-structured interviews to achieve the research aim. Moreover, it explains the sampling process and the sample composition, outlines the ethical considerations and explains how secondary sources allowed for data triangulation. Finally, the third section touches upon data analysis. It details the seven phases of the thematic analysis that I did to transform raw data into the narrative I develop in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 and how it fits in the existing literature (Chapter 7). This part section also discusses the challenges that I faced when I implemented this research design.

3.1. Research approach, methodology, and method

This section outlines the methodology and the method of the study. To do so, I lay out the foundations underpinning inductive reasoning and the inductive approach, which will also be important in the next section to justify in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the method of choice to generate and collect primary data and the use of secondary sources.

This study has inductive reasoning. As I have shown in Chapter 2, the existing literature describes digital media as a tool to strengthen democracy (Dahlgren, 2005; Kneuer and Datts, 2020). Still, it can also undermine it (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011) – these two processes are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, the *processes* that cause such democratic expansions and contractions in the digital context and how they affect a country's democratisation remain relatively underexplored. This study does not test existing theoretical explanations on digital democracy. Instead, it aims to generate

knowledge and inform the current scholarly work. It uses the Cambodia case to identify [some of the] reasons for democratic consolidation in the digital era in Cambodia, rather than the average effects of digital media on democracy. This logic depicts bottom-up or inductive reasoning (see Bryman, 2012, pp.24–27). It focuses on supplying evidence in underexplained links between digital media and democracy to expand existing knowledge on digital democracy.

The second choice was the adoption of a qualitative approach. The research approach, as Bryman (2012) indicates, underpins epistemological and ontological considerations. This study adopts an interpretivist epistemology to determine what accounts as knowledge, which assumes that the researcher's understanding of human interest gives access to reality. Therefore, researchers are critical actors in applying the research techniques to materialise the study (Williams, 2000). Since the aim is to understand human behaviour other than just describe it, my skills as a researcher were vital to interpreting the data (von Wright, 1971). Put differently, interpretivism involves researchers analysing the elements they are studying to generate outputs, hence emphasising a qualitative approach to prioritise a deep analysis of fewer views.

The ontological position or "nature of social entities" (Bryman, 2012, p.32) was also relevant to determine the qualitative approach of this study. This thesis adopts a constructivist position to assert that social actors continually accomplish social phenomena and meanings. "It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision" (p.33). Moreover, the "researcher always presents a specific version of social reality rather than one regarded as definitive" (ibid). Therefore, the constructivist philosophy positions the researcher within a specific context to collect participants' meanings. In other words, it emphasises the personal values of participants and considers their context. The qualitative approach was a good choice because the study produces fewer but thicker descriptions of my interactions with the informants to reveal democratising factors instead of generalising to the broader society.

Brady and Collier's (2010) four factors on the qualitative-quantitative distinction summarise adopting a qualitative approach. First, qualitative studies tend to use nominal scales of measurement – as opposed to ordinal scales. This study uses a nominal scale to categorise the variables that define Cambodia's democratisation in the digital era. Second, qualitative studies typically use small-N over large-N. This thesis uses Cambodia as a single case study (N=1). Third, unlike quantitative studies (Saud and Margono, 2021; Sinpeng, 2021), the criteria to formulate causal inferences in qualitative studies are vaguely developed. As I mentioned earlier, this study adopts inductive reasoning to identify underexplored causal mechanisms of democratisation rather than testing existing knowledge. Fourth, qualitative studies prioritise thick descriptions. This thesis uses a single case study to understand

people's experiences with digital democracy in Cambodia. It uses detailed descriptions to create meaningful leverage for inference rather than a higher number of thin descriptions.

3.2. Data sources and collection

This study uses primary and secondary data. Below, I justify the selection of in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the method to obtain primary data. It also explains how I generated and collected data, details the sample, and outlines the ethical considerations. Then, I present the use of secondary and how using multiple data sources allowed me to triangulate and develop a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomena.

3.2.1. Primary data

To collect primary data and understand civil society's perception of digital democracy, I interviewed everyday citizens and representatives of civil society organisations. Before explaining the sampling process and the informants' background who make up the sample, I explain why doing interviews was an appropriate choice. I also outline interviews' methodological opportunities and weaknesses and how this method differs from other researchers' methods to study digital democracy. Like the section that explains the inductive reasoning and the qualitative approach of the thesis, this part also emphasises that doing interviews was a meditated choice among other options to answer the research question the best possible way.

Interviews allowed me to meet a relatively small yet varied informant cohort to gain in-depth and detailed insights on their perception and use of digital media to engage in politics – in section 3.2.1, I give details of the sample. This method is aligned with inductive reasoning and the qualitative approach of the thesis. It allowed me to describe respondents' life experiences, narratives, and perceptions *in detail* to identify the political processes that inform digital democracy (Leavy (Ed), 2014, p.287).

Interviews offered significant advantages over other qualitative methods, such as focus groups. They would have allowed me to talk to more people, but I discarded them for three reasons. First, the study prioritised quality over quantity. For that reason, I also dismissed group interviews. Second, I anticipated a lack of engagement due to safety concerns and distrust due to the topic being too

sensitive in the Cambodian context. Doing individual interviews allowed me to overcome shy informants' lack of trust to talk about politics and ensure confidentiality. Third, interviews made discussions more time-efficient and cost-effective. They were also less demanding in technical equipment, organisation, and management – which was also a problem due to limited time and budget.

One of the singularities of interviews is that the number of respondents is usually smaller than the number of respondents obtained doing focus groups, and even more when employing quantitative methods like surveys. As I will explain in the sample section, I did forty-three interviews. As Yardley (2015) claims, statistical generalizability – research outputs must be statistically significant to generalise to the broader population – is a criterion often mistakenly used in qualitative studies.

> The aim of most quantitative research is to identify the predictable causal relationship that can be observed or "replicated" in different contexts. The reliability of measurements is therefore another important criterion for validity in quantitative research, since it is only possible to replicate a finding if the measurements used give the same results when administrated by an to different people at different times (Yardley, 2015, p.259).

However, Yardley continues, "qualitative researchers are often interested in the effects of context and individual differences" (ibid). That does not mean that qualitative research should not aim at producing generalisations. A qualitative approach uses a relatively small sample of selected cases to examine "subtle interactive processes" (ibid) to achieve vertical or analytical generalisations meaningful to a specific context and prove helpful to similar contexts. In contrast, quantitative research generates statistical or horizontal generalisations (Polit and Beck, 2010).

The foremost opportunity to do *in-depth* interviews was to focus more on the unique and unanticipated themes that each respondent brought up as conversations progressed. All interviews were semi-structured, so I had a basic set of questions around a few core topics. On the one hand, having a pre-established set of questions allowed me to initiate the conversations and keep them alive whenever respondents were silent. On the other hand, they gave respondents plenty of leeway to incorporate issues they considered relevant in the discussion (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, they also offered me the flexibility to ask prompt questions – mostly follow-up questions – whenever informants brought up new topics relevant to our discussions. In short, in-depth semi-structured interviews were an appropriate method to generate primary data and answer the research question because they

would allow me to prioritise the themes that informants might come up with, thus emphasising the inductive reason of the study.

This study is empirical and based on primary and qualitative data, which is a strength in itself. A great deal of the existing literature on digital democracy focuses on the theoretical aspects of digital media and democracy (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010; Gil-Garcia, Dawes and Pardo, 2018). Other studies carried out a quantitative analysis to explore the impact of digital democracy – some studies use secondary data (Lee, 2017; Saud and Margono, 2021), while others use primary sources (Sinpeng, 2021). However, research on digital democracy that uses primary data to do a qualitative analysis is less frequent – even less frequent in Cambodia. Therefore, the methodology of this study allows to accomplish the research aim and is a distinctive trait to existing research that helps explore why digital democracy is shaping democracy and democratisation in post-authoritarian regimes.

3.2.2. Doing interviews

Primary data comes from in-depth, semi-structured interviews that I did in Cambodia between June and September 2019. A crucial factor that facilitated obtaining primary data was my previous experience living and working in Cambodia between 2013 and 201. I had enough knowledge about the country to minimise the impact of adaptation and initial cultural shock. Moreover, the network of contacts I had built facilitated many arrangements like finding accommodation, renting transportation, or being reassured that I would have a group of people I could rely on. Professionally, the network I had in the country made me more time-efficient. In short, my previous experience in the country allowed me to determine that a three-month period to collect data would suffice.

Thanks to the pre-fieldwork arrangements and my previous experience living in the country, I started working the following day after arriving in Phnom Penh. Initially, I set up my new working space and reached critical people in my network. Even though I knew the country well, I used the first days to situate myself since there had been significant political developments since I left the country in August 2017. A big happening was a crackdown on political liberties, with its peak right after I moved out. Therefore, primary data collection began as soon as I arrived in Phnom Penh "with observations of specific instances and seeking to establish generalisation about the phenomenon under investigation" (Hyde, 2000, p.83).

The next step was two-fold. On the one hand, I arranged two more mock interviews with everyday citizens. That was the closest simulation to an actual interview because I was in the field, and I talked

to people I did not know – they were acquaintances of two of my contacts – who could have been actual participants. Those mock interviews helped me redefine the questions. For example, the phrasing was too complex, I was too direct about sensitive topics, or I had too many questions. I conducted those interviews in the same place where I would be doing actual interviews to test technical equipment and become familiar with the venue.

During the first week, I also met one potential research assistant; I had contacted her before travelling to Cambodia since I had known her from my years living in the country. However, we could not work together due to her full-time job. After that, one of my contacts introduced me to one of his co-workers, Rachel[2], interested in collaborating. She had completed a university degree overseas, was fluent in English, quietly interested in politics, had remarkable people skills, and could adapt to my working timetable. Before agreeing, we discussed all the terms, including data protection, anonymity, and confidentiality. Her primary job included translating some conversations, reaching potential respondents, or mediating between informants and me when the cultural barrier was a problem to increase trust.

3.2.3. The sample

This study offers an account of digital democracy from civil society, which encompasses various actors, as I have explained in Chapter 2. Since this thesis conceptualises civil society as a non-state sector, the sample does not contain informants representing the Government – namely the ruling party CPP, which has all 125 in the National Assembly since 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Nonetheless, I considered representatives from opposition political parties because they do not have seats in the National Assembly, so they are not part of the state sector. Unlike opposition political parties, the literature review conceptualises the private sector as a separate sphere (Atibil, 2012; Edwards, 2014). Thus, the sample does not contain the views of private businesses.

Ideally, the sample should include as many participants as possible to create as many intersections as possible. However, in practical terms, I had to consider the number of variables that I could have made against the available means, such as time in the field, budget, and capacity to process data within the

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[2] Rachel is my assistant's pseudonym. She is Khmer but uses an English name when she works with foreigners. Accordingly, I her pseudonym is an English name.

established time frame (Dawson et al., 1993). To make a sample that could be assumed to represent civil society, I used a combination of purposive sampling and snowballing.

Purposive sampling is a non-probabilistic type that relied on my criteria as a researcher to select informants who met specific qualities (Dörnyei, 2007; Etikan, 2016; Given, 2008; Lavrakas, 2008). The main advantage of purposive sampling is that since I made specific respondent categories, the data collection process was convenient and affordable in terms of time and money (Etikan, 2016; Mackey and Gass, 2016). However, making generalisations to the whole population remains a challenge, given the potential for selection biases (ibid).

I created two broad respondent categories, everyday citizens and civil society organisations (CSO). The sample has 53 (100%) respondents[3]. Out of the total, 24 (45%) were everyday citizens, and the remaining 29 (55%) represented CSOs. I required citizens to own a smartphone – the most popular digital tool to connect to the internet in the country (We Are Social, 2020) – with an active data plan to participate in the study. Citizens who did not own a smartphone *could have* provided relevant information to understand digital democracy, such as insights on the digital divide. However, this was beyond the scope of the study. The second requirement was that respondents had to live in Phnom Penh. Nonetheless, I considered citizens from other provinces who resided permanently in Phnom Penh. I limited the sample to urban citizens from the capital to economise resources – this is one of the study's limitations. However, many people living in Phnom Penh are actually from the countryside (Phong, Srou and Sola, 2016), which offered the possibility to bring elements of the urban-rural split into the analysis. Around 90% of Cambodians belong to the Khmer ethnic group (ODC, 2016). So, due to the dominance of Khmer ethnicity, the sample does not consider the different ethnic groups. Beyond these two requirements, the selection includes informants with different backgrounds, categorised according to three social markers.

The sample categorised citizens according to three markers. First, gender – male and female. Out of the 24 (45%) everyday citizens, there are 12 (50%) male and 12 female (50%) informants. The second marker is age. Ideally, the model should be as fragmented as possible (creating multiple age groups) to have more leverage and obtain causal inferences. On the flip side, a very fragmented sample also results in many data that, given the available resources, could have become difficult to manage. Therefore, I categorised citizens in "junior" and "senior". Different international organisations make different classifications in terms of age (UNDESA, n.d). So, taking similar studies in the Cambodian context as a model (Hughes and Eng, 2018), a junior citizen was between 15 and 35, while I labelled

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[3] I interviewed 53 people in 45 interactions because some CSOs were represented by two people.

respondents older than 35 as senior citizens. However, I only considered informants aged nineteen or over when participating in the study (born before 29 July 2000). This way, they would be, legally speaking, adult citizens and could vote in the elections of 2018. The sample contains 14 (58%) junior and 10 (42%) senior citizens.

The third marker is education. This variable is important because it reflects a significant socio-cultural divide in Cambodia. More cultural capital is likely to influence respondents' political and digital literacy. It also demonstrates a class divide because only those who can pay the tuition fees can access secondary education (Hughes and Eng, 2018; Savong School, n.d). Statistics show a sharp difference in the percentage of people who completed primary school versus those who completed secondary school or obtained a higher qualification. In 2017, the primary education completion rate was 79.9%, while secondary education was nearly half, at 42.6% (MOEYS, 2017). Therefore, the sample differentiates between primary school diplomas or lower and those with a secondary school diploma or higher. The sample contains 8 (33%) of the former and 16 (64%) of the latter.

Reaching respondents with a low degree of formal education was a challenge. The sample has eight informants with a low degree of formal education and sixteen with secondary education or higher. This disproportion is another of the study's limitations. Several factors challenged meeting informants with a low degree of formal education. The biggest hurdle was their lack of trust combined with the cultural barrier that existed with them – even with Rachel's help, my research assistant. Most respondents with this profile were outside my network, thus more difficult to reach. With Rachel's, I could approach several citizens who had not completed primary school. Still, many refused to get involved because they would not trust us. While I could interview eight individuals with primary education or less, all of them were close contacts of my network, and they were the hardest to convince to take part in the study.

The remaining 29 (55%) informants belong to the second category – CSOs' spokespeople. As I described in the literature review, CSOs encompass people from many different backgrounds, such as NGOs, media, or academia. Still, regardless of the diversity of backgrounds, the selection process was more straightforward than citizens' since there were no age or education restrictions. I tried to incorporate spokespeople of CSOs with a wide range of backgrounds so I could get insights on the same topic from the perspective of organisations working in different fields, such as NGOs, INGOs,

think tanks, the media sector, influencers or bloggers, grassroots leaders such as activists, academics, and representatives of opposition political parties[4].

Out of the 29 respondents who represented CSOs, 13 (45%) are NGO/INGO workers, 6 (21%) grassroots leaders/activists/influencers, 3 (10%) media representatives, 2 (7%) think tanks, 2 (7%) political analysts, 2 academics/representatives of the education sector (7%), and 1 (3%) board member of an opposition party. Board members of opposition political parties were also tough to reach – I reached one. Initially, I tried to contact them, but they would not reply to my messages or calls. One potential explanation is that many political parties in the shadow of the CPP are poorly institutionalised.

> It's election season in Cambodia, and the fireflies are out. Cambodians use that term – "ampil ampik," in the Khmer language – to refer to little-known political parties that flash onto the scene shortly before an election, then fade back into obscurity. Twenty parties, some just a few months old, will be on the ballot when national elections are held this month. But most voters will have heard of only one: the Cambodian People's Party, led by Hun Sen, the authoritarian prime minister (Wallace, 2016, n.p).

After unsuccessfully trying to reach them several times, one of my close contacts – who worked for an INGO – warned me of the links that existed between those ghost parties and the ruling party CPP. At that point, I considered that it would be safer not to take that risk.

Table 1 - Sample of the study

Total number of informants: 53 (100%)	
Everyday citizens: 24 (45%)	**Civil society organisations: 29 (55%)**
- **12 (50%) male and 12 (50%) female** - **14 (58%) junior and 10 (42%) senior** - **8 (37%) low formal education and 16 (64%) higher education**	- 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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[4] Appendix I contains a list of interviews with the background information of all respondents.

To reach everyday citizens, I used purposive sampling. I initially used my network in the country. Contacting people I already knew increased the potential for selection bias (Berk, 1983). However, I concluded that using my network was the best strategy because it was based on relationships of trust. Given that politics is a sensitive topic in Cambodia, trust was an indispensable element to talk about politics – as I will argue in future chapters – and was the main reason why the first interviewees agreed to speak with me. I tried to approach random strangers to introduce myself and my study on three occasions, but they never got back to me, presumably because they did not trust me.

I also used the snowballing technique to get more participants. After each interview, I asked my informants if they could get me in touch with new potential respondents – I told them the type of respondent I was looking for. On some occasions, I also used snowballing with people in my network who were not my informants. I approached them so they could introduce me to new citizen networks.

To reach CSOs, I initially used my network, too. I knew some of the institutions and people relevant to my research, although I knew them personally in very few cases. I used two techniques to reach out. First, I got in touch with the few people I knew who worked for organisations, which resulted in some interviews. As everyday citizens, the snowballing technique was adequate to know new organisations or people relevant to the aim of the study. Second, cold calling and emails. I used this strategy for organisations I could not reach through my network. In the first email or phone call, I introduced my research and expressed my interest in their work. Mainly, CSO got back to me, and we had a meeting. Others – a small group – never replied, and just a handful of them politely declined to meet me.

I used two parameters to determine when I had enough data. The first parameter was saturation (Low, 2019). In broad terms, saturation happens when "no new information emerges" (p.132) from new data. There is theoretical, data, and thematic saturation (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). Low (2019) argues that there is no real difference between data and thematic saturation since the two refer to repetition and redundancy of concepts that stem from data (Sandelowsky, 2008, p.876). Then, theoretical saturation occurs "when the complete range of constructs that make up the theory is fully represented by the data" (Starks and Brown Trinidad, 2007, p.1375; Saunders et al., 2018, p.1895).

Given the inductive nature of this project – it does not test any existing theoretical framework – I used thematic saturation. Towards the end of fieldwork, specific ideas and concepts started to repeat themselves in the interviews, especially among everyday citizens, who narrated similar stories with different hints. Overall, the very last interview that I did – (r1.06), a political analyst who provided a very comprehensive view on digital democracy in Cambodia – was very reassuring since his thoughts wrapped up most of the initial codes that I had generated over the previous three months.

The second parameter I used to establish when to stop collecting data was snowballing. As I have explained earlier in this chapter, I used this technique to identify some of my respondents. Then it also allowed me to determine when to stop looking for new informants, especially CSOs. At the end of each interview, I asked them whether they could contact me with new potential informants. However, towards the end of fieldwork, many informants referred me to people I had already interviewed. That was indicative that I was reaching saturation, and I had enough data to build a comprehensive and sound narrative.

3.2.4. Ethical considerations

Before collecting primary data, I had to contemplate numerous ethical considerations. So, this study complies with the University of Bristol Ethics of Research Policy and Procedure (University of Bristol, 2017) and adheres to the University's Research Governance and Integrity Policy. The design of a sound set of ethical considerations had three goals: ensuring my informant's safety, protecting the data I obtained in the field and remaining safe during my stay in Cambodia.

The primary strategy to ensure my respondents' integrity was to give them all the necessary information to understand the implications of participating in this study. So, I introduced myself and gave "full information to participants, including outlining any rights to withdraw, intended publication of the results of the research, information on data use and sharing" (University of Bristol, 2017, p.6). I did that verbally, and I also gave participants a written summary of my research[5]. If I contacted participants by phone or email, I briefly introduced myself and my study and arranged a face-to-face meeting. Following these steps was another way of ensuring that their participation in the study was voluntary.

Once they agreed and before the interviews, all informants signed a consent form. Moreover, as part of the recorded interviews, I asked for their verbal consent. That was beneficial in two ways. First, they permitted me to interview them up to three times, and I received proof of two of them. Second, I ensured that participants understood the terms and conditions of the consent form. All informants used their names to sign the consent forms, which raised safety concerns. Anonymity and confidentiality were essential to mitigate them.

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[5] See Appendix III for the informant's consent form.

> Anonymity is reasonably straightforward. At root, it simply means that we do not name the person or research site involved but, in research, it is usually extended to mean that we do not include information about any individual or research site that will enable that individual or research site to be identified by others. (Walford, 2005, p.84).

Information is confidential when it remains private, thus implying that researchers will not pass it to others. "It is ethical, of course, for researchers to keep confidential any information that they receive in this way – but it is totally ludicrous to offer confidentiality to respondents about the totality of the information that they give to researchers" (2005, p.85) because the aim of doing research is to publish its outcomes. Therefore, the primary ethical concern was anonymity, which protected the identity of respondents and ensured their safety whenever confidentiality was not possible – only disseminate their stories as research findings.

To ensure participants' anonymity, I replaced their names with a numeric code unique for each informant used in transcriptions, field notes, and other research notes during data analysis. I kept their real names in a separate digital file that I stored safely – see protocol below. This way, people's names are only in the consent forms, which raises questions on the measures I took to protect the data I obtained – including consent forms, field notes, interview notes, and voice recordings. To ensure that all documents and files were safe, I digitised and encrypted everything, following the University's guidance and requirements. That strategy was double-fold because it enhanced respondent's safety – their personal stories were protected – as well as my own since I would have none of the data with me in case of theft or should I have been in the spotlight of state authorities.

After obtaining new data, I would connect to a VPN using my laptop – which was password protected – and use the University of Bristol remote desktop, which added another layer of security. I downloaded all files that contained data and uploaded them to the University drive. I created two backup copies of each file. One as an encrypted and password-protected file in my laptop, and another in the cloud service – also encrypted and password protected – Tresorit. Gaining access to its cloud and desktop application required a two-step authentication. I digitised and uploaded all files following the same procedure, including audio files, research notes, and consent forms. Finally, I deleted or securely got rid of all original files and hardcopy notes, except the consent forms, which I kept in a locker in a space only accessible with a card and personal ID.

To enhance the anonymity of my informants, I interviewed citizens and those categorised as CSOs that did not have an office in public places that, paradoxically, ensured privacy. For example, most co-

working spaces allow access to private meeting rooms. When I interviewed spokespeople of CSOs who had an office, I visited them there to offer as much privacy as possible.

Some of the measures I mentioned above were designed to enhance respondents' safety and my own. For example, I did interviews in public places to anonymise informants and avoid travelling to remote and unknown locations on my own. Working in public areas ensured that I was always nearby people I knew. Whenever I met spokespeople of CSOs in their offices, I used my support bubble in Phnom Penh, and I informed some of my colleagues of the time and location of my interviews. The condominium landlord where I stayed also provided plenty of support; we have known each other for years, and I informed him that I was doing interviews. My support bubble was also critical to ensure my mental well-being; taking time off and talking through the challenges I faced was extremely helpful to relieve stress. Outside Cambodia, I maintained regular contact with my thesis supervisors. I sent them periodic check-up emails to inform them of my progress and ensure that I was coping well with the situation. To communicate with each other, we only used encrypted forms of communication.

3.2.5. Secondary sources and triangulation

The study includes secondary sources like scholarly literature on democracy, democratisation, digital democracy, and articles that apply to the Cambodia case. Other sources include reports from Cambodian and international organisations and the pieces of Cambodian and international outlets. I used secondary data to contextualise the study. Many of the sources that I used were produced after 1991 – when the country began its democratic transition and scholars and organisations analysed that critical stage – and between the late 2000s and late 2010s, when digital media became popular in Cambodia and the first academic and non-academic pieces that explored its impact emerged.

Using secondary data complemented this study in two ways. First, it gives context to present and narrow down the research topic. Second, I used secondary data as a strategy to triangulate – combining data from different sources (Denzin, 2006) – with the data I obtained from doing interviews. This way, I could observe the research topic from at least two different angles (Flick, 2004). It is important to note that I did *not* use secondary data for corrective purposes. Instead, as Denzin and Lincoln (1994) note, using multiple data sources adds breath and allows for a deeper understanding of the research topic. Put differently, it justifies knowledge.

3.3. Data analysis

The third and final section examines data analysis and the significant challenges that I faced during the process. To do so, I explain how I did a thematic analysis and how I broke the process down into six phases between fieldwork and post-fieldwork stages. The end of the section includes challenges that I encountered during data collection and its analysis.

3.3.1. Seven stages to data evaluation

Data processing and analysis was a process that happened in several stages, in different moments in time, and multiple locations. I used two types of data: primary data in interviews and field notes and secondary data to contextualise and back up some respondents' claims. In this section, I will focus on primary data. The generation and collection of primary data began when I arrived in Phnom Penh. I took notes of my daily routine, thoughts, and reflections during the interviews I made, which helped me recall how discussions took place and the small details that caught my attention. I started processing those field notes even before I finished all the interviews and transcriptions, explaining why data analysis began in the field (Adams et al., 2007).

To make sense of all the data that I generated and gathered, I did a thematic analysis. It creates themes to identify, analyse, organise and describe processes found within the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Given the relatively large amount of data I obtained, a thematic analysis allowed me to examine and contrast people's views with their backgrounds to identify similarities, differences, and unanticipated insights (ibid) in a systematic way. A thematic analysis offered great flexibility, which was especially valuable given the inductive nature of the study and the few theoretical preconceptions I had before gathering primary data. However, it is a method of analysis that some (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan, Coughlan and Cronin, 2007) have argued to complement other forms of analysis.

Nonetheless, other researchers (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017) claim that a thematic analysis technique results in meaningful research when done correctly. Nowell's et al. (2017) split a thematic analysis into familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, analysis and outputs. Below, I explain my analysis using these six stages. Moreover, to make it more detailed, I insert transcribing as another stage.

First, familiarisation with the data. That took place in the field after each interview when I read the notes – observations, particularities of each conversation – I took during interviews (Tuckett, 2005). A

proper archive of field notes and interviews records is crucial because it "provides an audit trail and a benchmark against which later data analysis and interpretations can be tested for adequacy" (Nowell et al., 2017, p.5). In my case, reading those notes and listening to the conversations I recorded made me reflect on the data I collected and become familiarised with it. Moreover, that was a change to improve the interview questions.

Second, generating initial codes and actively thinking about my data (Savage, 2000). That step began during fieldwork as I was gathered data as an interim stage. I made lists of concepts to understand why they mattered and connected to other ideas that respondents named (Nowell et al., 2017). That list expanded as I was doing more interviews.

Third, transcribing. Even though I could transcribe a few interviews during fieldwork, I did most of them afterwards. To do so, I manually used MS Word and, occasionally, I used the dictate function and the application Live Transcribe & Sound Notifications. While the help of technology made transcribing interviews more comfortable, I stopped using it because I realised that if I transcribed manually, I was listening more actively, could take better notes, and think of initial codes.

Fourth, searching for themes. Once I had read the content of all the interviews, I gave codes to small bits of content to simplify data, focus on its content, and establish links between codes (Nowell et al., 2017). I created four comprehensive codes: politics in Cambodia, the public sphere, digital tools and media, and the digital divide. Each code had multiple sub-codes, although a common challenge when coding that I faced was creating too many codes (King, 2004), essentially because the same bit of data can be coded in different ways. In the subsequent stages, I facilitated the number of codes. To file and manage codes and themes, I used a combination of NVivo and Microsoft Word.

Then, codes transformed into themes. Themes are essential because they unify different codes that bring meaning and identity to recurrent experiences, becoming processed data (DeSantis and Ugarriza, 2000; Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, themes capture essential ideas concerning the research aim (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I used a few pre-defined codes to do a data-driven analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004); I identified themes from data and linked them to other bits of data, resulting in a detailed description that responded to the inductive nature of the research design. To do so, I used a linear template to organise the themes that stemmed from codes and keep track of them.

Moreover, I also used mindmaps as a form of visual aid (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Not all themes were relevant at first. That is why I also created a miscellaneous list of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) with those bits of data that, at first, did not fit into other themes. That list ensured that I did not abandon

bits of data, many of which were helpful in further stages of the analysis to provide background details of the study or complement other themes.

Fifth, reviewing the themes (ibid). Revising the themes allowed me to make further sense of the data I had generated by creating a more meaningful distinction between themes, which allowed me to condense the amount of data to be more manageable (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006). With a revision of the themes, I also identified inadequacies. The flaws I spotted were not necessarily mistakes but themes that I broke into smaller units of analysis (Brown and Clarke 2006), overlapping codes (King, 2004) – therefore, I had to figure out whether the information was repeated or the overlap provided meaningful insights. I also identified themes that did not have enough data. In that case, I either used them to complement other themes, or I dismissed them for this study but kept the information for further research. Implicit in this phase was returning to raw data to ensure that outputs from themes were grounded in the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

After I had redefined the themes, the fifth phase was to determine the specific aspects that each theme captured and why they were relevant (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Put differently, I identified the stories that themes conveyed to build a narrative made of intertwined themes that were, at the same time, related to the research aim and question (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Pope, 2000). As King (2004) points out, the main challenge was identifying how much each theme goes into the narrative. The final list of codes and themes that I generated was relatively large. However, not all themes accounted for the same weight, and while the narrative that I built could have many more streams, I had to pick the few primary themes that allowed me to arrange the main narrative. The rest of the themes were also important, but their function was to complement the meaning of primary themes. This process required going back multiple times to the research aim, question, raw data, and codes.

The sixth phase was writing the report – in this case, the empirical chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) – to present a story or narrative to link the themes with the research topic. The aim was to "articulate what each theme means, as well as the assumptions that underpin it and the implications of each theme. The final analysis should create an overall story about what the different themes reveal about the topic" (Nowell et al., 2017, p.11) in a way that communicates the logical process that I followed to generate the research outcomes. In doing so, I progressed to an analytical narrative that summarised the patterns that I identified in the data set and their meanings and implications to existing literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To facilitate understanding specific points and back my claims, I used multiple secondary data sources – scholarly literature, reports from local and international organisations, or news from local media outlets. Moreover, I added several direct quotes from my

informants to go beyond descriptions and demonstrate the relevance and validity of themes. I complimented the analysis with my field notes (King, 2004).

Seventh, generating outputs. That is a vital step to construct stands with merit, link the argument of the thesis to existing literature and add new theoretical and practical applications (Aronson, 1995; Tuckett, 2005).

3.3.2. Data collection and analysis challenges

In this section, I reflect on the challenges I faced during data collection and analysis. The overall challenge was learning how to be – and remain – self-reflexive when I met other difficulties, which had different root causes and applied to different contexts. Reflexivity was the primary technique I used throughout the research to become more aware of my role as a researcher in my study and minimise biases. "In simple terms, reflexivity is an awareness of the researcher's role in the practice of research and the way this is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research processes and outcomes" (Haynes, 2012, p.72). Therefore, reflexivity entails an iterative process or thinking circularly (O'Reilly, 2009) to assess each step before taking another – this demonstrates that even the inductive reasoning incorporated deductive elements.

The first challenge was my biases. I had lived in Cambodia for nearly four years in 2010-14, and I had witnessed the elections of 2013. So, I had a solid attachment for the country and its people – without those experiences, I would have never come up with the idea of doing this thesis in the first place. Moreover, after I left Cambodia, I remained in touch with several people there and followed the country's political updates. It is essential to mention that living there in the past and having a network was advantageous because it facilitated fieldwork easier and made it more time-efficient. Still, I also had several pre-conceptions and views on the political situation of the country. In other words, my biases became a challenge in the early stages of the research when I was framing the research problem. I first noticed that my biases were a problem through the comments of my supervisors, who then taught me to zoom out to gain some perspective and consider alternative views other than just mine.

The language barrier was another challenge. My command of the Khmer language is not good enough to communicate with native people in their language, creating several difficulties. For example, reaching out to respondents who spoke little or no English, having a fluid conversation during the

interviews, and building trust with people was difficult because we did not speak the same language. I overcame this limitation – partly, at least – with Rachel's help, my research assistant. I required her help to reach out to some everyday citizens, conduct the interview, translate, and save the cultural barrier. More importantly, she helped me build trust with my informants. While I was able to conduct interviews with Rachel as an interpreter, communicating in the Khmer language would have improved the quality of my interactions with local informants, making conversations more fluid and interactive. Still, working with a research assistant allowed me to build trust faster.

Remaining as objective as possible was crucial to frame the research problem and embrace the unexpected and unanticipated developments during fieldwork. In short, I had to be aware of my own biases to minimising their impact. For example, some of my participants expressed political views that were radically opposite to mine, or they did not make sense because they seemed to contradict me. However, instead of judging them, I reflected on their comments and framed them according to their contexts, identifying why they said what they said.

The inductive nature of the data collection process presented several challenges too. First, I interviewed people and the spokespeople of CSOs from numerous backgrounds, which meant that all respondents addressed the same topic from different angles. Moreover, the open-ended structure of the interviews gave informants plenty of leeway to answer, thus making conversations relatively unpredictable. Reflexivity was crucial to navigate the data that my informants were generating. So, my task involved collecting data and reflecting on it while still in the field. That happened in two ways. First, the semi-structured nature of the interaction forced me to stay focused on people's answers to come up almost instantly with follow-up questions to make the most of those interactions. Second, I had little time between interviews – I did forty-three interviews in ninety days – but reflecting on each interaction was crucial to improving the quality of the following discussion. In that case, reflexivity was a circular process: interview-evaluation-reshape-interview.

I interviewed people with very different backgrounds, *averaging* one interview every two to three days. Adaptability and uncertainty were also challenges. Uncertainty took various forms. The main one was that I arrived in Phnom Penh without any interview in the schedule, and it took me almost two weeks to do the first one. As I was getting new interviews, I had to adapt to the needs of my informants, especially in the time and places where we met. That meant several daily commutes from my condominium to my workplace and the offices of organisations. That impacted my capacity to reflect on the interviews that I was doing. Even if each new discussion boosted the confidence in my ability and skills to do further interviews, I spent plenty of time commuting and adapting to last-minute changes in the schedule of my informants. Consequently, I did not have as much time as I would have

like to reflect on each interview as I would have liked before doing the following one. Towards the end of fieldwork, I was mentally and physically exhausted, and I developed certain apathy towards doing more interviews had I had more time in the country.

Embracing an inductive or bottom-up approach was challenging, too – even if that is the research design I made. The unpredictability that I faced during fieldwork that I explained above continued during the data analysis stage. Making sense of the data to interpret its meaning and produce a research output also meant reshaping the conceptual framework I had built to accommodate the findings. While this is the nature of an inductive approach, it also means that a significant part of the work of this thesis took place in the last months of the project.

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the research process I undertook to design a research plan that would allow me to gather data and generate research outputs to answer the research question. I split this chapter into three sections that reflect my choices during the research design process and how I obtained and analysed data. The objective of this chapter has been to justify the importance of doing a qualitative investigation to explore the circumstantial elements that shape political participation in Cambodia in the digital age.

I began by explaining the inductive reasoning of the study. Adopting a bottom-up approach to studying digital democracy allowed me to identify contextual elements that shape political participation in Cambodia, which academic literature has not explored in the current digital age. This thesis identifies political fear as one of these elements. Next, I have justified using qualitative methods to gain a deep understanding of the relevance of political fear in the internet era. In the second part of the chapter, I highlighted the importance of generating primary data. With qualitative interviews, I could focus on my respondent's life stories to assess the impact of fear in the country's political scene of the past and present. I showed the study sample and how I categorised my informants as everyday citizens and civil society organisations. I also discussed the ethical issues I had to consider before travelling to Cambodia and interview my informants. This study also uses secondary data, which is vital to contextualise the study and back with evidence many of my informants' claims during our conversations. Finally, the third part has focused on the seven stages of the data analysis I did and, finally, the most significant analysis challenges of collecting and working with my data.

4. An encounter with the culture of political fear and distrust

[Fear] is the arbiter of power: invisible, indeterminate, and silent (Green, 1999, p.55)

Upon my arrival in Phnom Penh to collect data, many local people I met and talked to were afraid to discuss political issues with me. That was not an entirely unexpected situation. Before travelling to the field, another researcher told me that in his recent trip to Cambodia in 2017, he noticed that fear profoundly shaped public life in the country. I got a better sense of the importance of fear when I started doing interviews when several respondents told me they feared our meetings because we were about to talk about politics[6]. Most interlocutors were cautious and did not verbalise their fear at first. They seemed intimidated as if talking to me was something they were not supposed to be doing. Three of them whispered that they were scared before our interview. Another few were straightforward and expressed their fear verbally. I felt like if they had been waiting for an opportunity to tell someone, "of course we are scared!" (r3.04).

I also noticed that fear seemed to be permanently in the atmosphere. Some people I met were afraid of being monitored, primarily online. For example, one of my gatekeepers warned me *not* to mention *again* the names of certain politicians, political parties and organisations – namely the ruling party's opposition – in our Messenger[7] conversations. He feared state authorities hacking his social media accounts and read his chats. Due to fear and precaution, the staff in some organisations kept my mobile phone in a separate room to minimise the risk of being listened to while I was conducting interviews. Furthermore, the workers of most organisations and activists I got in touch with would only communicate with me via Signal and Telegram. These two applications were considered safer alternatives to Facebook Messenger, one of the most popular messaging applications in the country. Other informants seemed less constrained by fear and took fewer precautions. For example, two ordinary citizens (r2.18; r2.19) spoke confidently about their political views. Nonetheless, I got the impression that they were constantly checking their surroundings as if they feared someone could be listening.

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[6] All informants were previously briefed about the topic of the interview; they were told that it was about their use of smartphones and social media in politics.

[7] I never had sensitive conversations on Messenger, but I learnt it is not even safe to mention certain names, especially members of opposition parties, activists, etc.

In the end, fear got into me. At the end of our interview, two NGO workers told me, "we always have somebody watching us from that café[8]. So, you might have been recorded. They are watching…" (r3.18; r3.19). When I left the building, I was worried that someone could note down the number plate of my motorbike, follow me, or approach the guard and ask for the visitor list, which had my name and contact details. Those are not uncommon practices, which are generally used as a dissuasive measure against unwelcomed visitors (Frewer, 2013). Experiencing fear due to researching a political topic was new to me. However, it did not seem a novelty to many people I met, and I instantly related to my respondents.

I started processing fear as a challenge shaping my fieldwork. I became paranoid about being monitored and took some days off to reflect on fear, politics in Cambodia, and my research. A long and deep conversation with my supervisors helped to ground my feelings and gain some perspective. Moreover, I re-evaluated some ethical considerations to keep respondents and myself safe. For example, I replaced Messenger and WhatsApp for Signal for all kinds of communication – personal and professional – I established that I would remove the SIM card from my phone before each interview. I also reviewed the encryption measures of all my means of communication to communicate with my supervisors; I revised the encryption system of my email account and replaced WhatsApp for Signal, which is regarded as a safer software. In prioritising my safety, I concluded I would stop[9] trying to arrange interviews with Government officials. Furthermore, I decided not to insist on informants I suddenly could not contact anymore after they promised me valuable information, such as the spokesperson of a political party (r3.15).

Eventually, I took fear as a research opportunity. After all, the aim of the inductive reasoning I adopted for this investigation – see Chapter 3 – was to identify unexpected and underexplored circumstantial elements like fear. At that moment, I realised that fear would be a core theme of the thesis. Other researchers (Schoenberger and Beban, 2018) researching Cambodia have identified fear as a form of violence that threatens people and researchers alike. As a result, they have become more attentive to their encounters with state authorities, study subjects, and even their observations in the field (ibid). In my case, the encounter with the culture of political fear made me more aware of the country's political scene.

This chapter introduces the culture of political fear and distrust as vital elements in the study of Cambodian politics. It argues that people's political fear and lack of trust are rooted in the illiberal

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[8] They pointed out to business across the street. The word café replaces the name of the original business.

[9] I had already started to contact some gatekeepers to reach senior members of the CPP, including one minister.

regimes that have ruled Cambodia since the colonial period, facilitating the creation and expansion of fear and distrust. Under the CPP's competitive authoritarianism, political participation and the state of civil society have deteriorated. Electoral democracy was successfully implemented in 1991, and the country has celebrated elections regularly since 1993. However, the government has struggled to ensure strong constitutional democracy to ensure that people can fully engage in politics in an uncoerced manner, thus making elections less meaningful or, in other terms, a sham. That has consolidated the CPP's political hegemony, resulting in a power gap between civil society and the Government.

This chapter contextualises fear and trust from the latest stage of Cambodia's colonial rule obtaining independence from France in 1953. There are two parts. In the first one, I provide context from the colonial era until 1991, when the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) were signed and peace was established. I argue that Norodom Sihanouk, the latest head of state in the colonial era, used the illiberal colonial state apparatus he had inherited to build an illiberal and personalistic type of regime. He used fear to gain political power, limiting people's political liberties. Later, the internal political divisions resulted in a civil war and authoritarian rule under the Khmer Rouge dictatorship and the Vietnamese occupation. In those decades, the culture of fear was protracted, and democracy only developed to a minimal extent and not consistently.

The second part examines fear and trust from 1991 when the PPA were signed, focusing on Hun Sen's leadership. I analyse how he built a new authoritarian regime rooted in the illiberal political past to nurture further the culture of fear and distrust. Although the country has celebrated elections regularly, political liberties have been severely restricted, harming Cambodia's opportunity to develop a substantive type of democracy. Exploring the origins of fear and distrust and their impact on political participation is necessary to contextualise Cambodia's political landscape that digital media hope to change in the 2010s, which I show in chapters 5 and 6.

Table 2 - Cambodia's historical timeline between 1863 and the 2000s

1863 – 1953:	**French colonialism**
1953 – 1970:	Norodom Sihanouk's rule
1970 - 1975:	Lon Nol's coup to oust Sihanouk and civil war
1975 - 1979:	Khmer Rouge
1979 - 1989:	Vietnamese occupation
1989 - 1991:	State of Cambodia
1991:	Paris Peace Agreements
1993:	first elections of the new democratic era
1997:	Hun Sen's coup. He becomes solo PM
The late 2000s:	Digital era

4.1. Political fear and distrust; a persisting old issue

Although I was shocked to see how vital fear was in Cambodia's political scene, most of my informants were not surprised about that. They seem to be used to it. One INGO spokesperson (r3.26) explained that fear was an "old" (r3.26) element in the politics of the country. He said that "the situation now [in 2019] is that we are *going back* to fear. Now, citizens no longer feel safe to talk [about politics] on social media" (r3.26). His observations suggested that fear is an old issue strongly connected to the present.

Research (Chhim, 2012, 2013) confirms what that INGO representative said and shows that fear is not novel in Cambodia. It is strongly linked to episodes of conflict and authoritarianism in the past. For example, the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. Currently, rulers like PM Hun Sen still use the country's relationship with fear to induce even more fear. Government officials often make explicit links between periods of war and political instability in the 1970s and current opposition parties.

> The prime minister who would be king entered the 2013 election season in full form. "If you love Hun Sen, if you pity Hun Sen, if you are satisfied with Hun Sen, if you believe in Hun Sen," he enjoined Cambodians, then "vote for the CPP." As in past elections, he campaigned on generalities about stability and progress and invoked the specter of the Khmer Rouge […]. He also issued threats. A land-titling campaign would end if the CPP were not re-elected. Civil war might break out. "Change is not a game," Hun Sen said month before the elections (Giry, 2015, p.148)

As Giry notes, the goal is to use fear and distrust to generate uncertainty among people and weaken political alternatives to the ruling party to maintain the political status quo. In the Cambodian context, researchers use the term *baksbat* (Chhim, 2012, 2013; Kidron and Kirmayer, 2019). It is a Khmer term translated as "the permanent breaking of the body or spirit", "broken courage" (Chhim, 2013, p.162), or simply as fear[10],[11]. *Baksbat* captures the salient role of fear in the political realm. According to Chhim (2013), going through distressing, dangerous, or violent situations like civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime is the primary cause of *baksbat* among many Cambodian people. What stands out is that 86% of Chhim's informants narrowed fear down to the political context. His informants learned to live with fear, which had negatively affected their political engagement, highlighting that fear and politics are tightly interlinked.

The same INGO worker I mentioned earlier (r3.26) said that fear defines their way of seeing the world of older Cambodian people. "I think that the older generations have a first-hand experience with trauma, the experience of attacks, killings and everything… so they have different thinking" (r3.26). It is important to note that, even if civil war and genocide happened over forty years ago, many of my informants born much later were also scared of politics. As I explain in section 4.2.3, some of the youngest informants said they were afraid of politics because of what some of their older relatives had told them about politics, showing that fear can be transmitted. That is not unique to Cambodia. Rierder and Elbert (2013) found out that the descendants of the Rwandan genocide were at higher risk of suffering from mental health issues, including fear, making them more vulnerable citizens.

Since fear is related to violent periods in the past and many citizens still show political fear, it is necessary to explore how fear has persisted in the democratic age and how it has affected political participation. Contextualising fear is necessary before I incorporate how new technology has changed political participation in Cambodia. Below, I contextualise fear and trust from 1953, when Cambodia became independent from France, although I also refer to the colonial period. Fear in Cambodia is a

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[10] I will use *baksbat* and fear interchangeably.

[11] Translation by the research assistant.

much older reality dating back to the Khmer Empire (9th to 15th centuries) battles with neighbouring regions (Corfield, 2009). Nonetheless, 1953 is a crucial point that allows references to the colonial era and its illiberal state apparatus, which post-colonial rulers like King Norodom Sihanouk used to institutionalise an illiberal system and achieve his political goals. That explains the country's lack of a power-sharing tradition (Strangio, 2020) and my informant's political fear and distrust, which influenced digital democracy, as I show in chapters 5 and 6. Overall, understanding the role of fear will also be crucial to analyse the consolidation of democratic governance in Cambodia in the digital age.

4.1.1. The Sihanouk era and the colonial roots of political fear and distrust

Under the late King Norodom Sihanouk rule, Cambodia saw the first episode of authoritarian leadership in the post-colonial era. That moment in history was critical because, while Cambodia gained independence from France, Sihanouk inherited a state apparatus from the colonial period to build an illiberal system based on the centralisation of political power, far from the thin-thick democratic ideal system. Under Sihanouk's rule, fear was vital to outsmart and repress his political rivals and become politically dominant.

Sihanouk was deeply connected to colonial elites. He was appointed King by the French in 1941 (Moo, 2006), hoping that he would be malleable and bent to the will of the colonial elites (Tully, 2002). He was a symbolic king subdued by his colonial loyalties and understood that his role was dispensable and could be easily replaced by alternative nationalist figures (Moo, 2006; Tully, 2002). In 1946, an era of constitutional reform began under the supervision of the colonial power. The aim was

> to produce an atmosphere of political liberality in the capital and the appearance of Western-type political organisation. Royal absolutism was abolished, although the royal prerogative did not completely disappear. Nevertheless, in constitutional terms, the monarchy was a drastically weakened force, and thenceforth the path to the exercise of a limited power lay in securing support from a newly created electoral which was in no way restricted by special qualifications (Leifer, 1968, p.126).

As Leifer notes, that era threatened Sihanouk's dominance because the king would reign more and rule less. Even though the constitutional logic prevented the monarch from accumulating more power, Sihanouk was determined to become a strong statesman, hold the reins of power and transition from a dispensable to an influential leadership position (Moo, 2006; Osborne, 1994). He minimised the effects of the constitutional system and defied the rise of movements like the Khmer Issarak (ibid), a

leftish rebellion against the French colonial rule and the monarchy, and the intentions of the Democratic Party to reduce the monarch's powers (Osborne, 1994).

Crucial to his leadership and popularity, Sihanouk initiated the "crusade for independence" (Chandler, 1993: 45) – for which he dissolved the parliament – and Cambodia became independent from France in 1953. 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina, Cambodia representatives pledged an open political process with free elections (Leifer, 1968). However, with Sihanouk as the head of the state, Cambodia remained an illiberal system in which people were kept from decision-making (Tully, 2002). Sihanouk mirrored French rule and rebuilt the nation while centralising power and institutionalising autocracy (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018). He was labelled as a "benevolent despot" (Chandler, 2012, n.p). As the head of the state, he created a robust personalist regime to achieve political dominance that transcended politics (Ayres, 2000; Chandler, 1993; Kiernan, 2008; Smith, 1967). The country's significant developments in education and agriculture (Chandler, 1993) made him very popular among the popular classes. He represented the pinnacle of Cambodia's social pyramid (Smith, 1967), and "the country's "golden age" as many Cambodians would remember it, was dominated by Sihanouk's personality – his foibles, obsessions, and eccentricities" (Strangio, 2020, p.8).

Despite Sihanouk's popularity, "his constitutional position remained an obstacle to political control" (Leifer, 1968, p.126). He rejected the liberal values and abdicated to create and lead the Sangkum, his political party, to escape from the constricting cloak of constitutionalism and legitimate his political decisions (Chandler, 1993; Moo, 2006). Sihanouk's move showed that "Cambodia had no tradition of power sharing or democratic elections[12], and Sihanouk's modernized absolutism left little room for dissent" (Strangio, 2020, p.9). That impaired the popularity of the Democratic Party, Sangkum's primary political opponent, and dimmed the prospects of a liberal system based on power-sharing. Repression and fear to outmanoeuvre his domestic rivals were vital for Sihanouk to perpetuate illiberal practices and centralise political power in his hands. Fear was instrumentalised to marginalise his political opponents (Moo, 2006), who were constantly bullied, showing no space for opposition forces (Chandler, 2012). The use of threats, violence and recurrent tantrums against dissenting voices was recurrent (Becker and Mydans, 2012), sending the message that Sihanouk was the only man in charge and those who opposed his doctrine would be wiped off the political scene (Franceschini and

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[12] Democratic mechanisms – constitution, the National Assembly, and political parties – were introduced by the French in 1947 as a response to rising nationalism after the Japanese troops seized the country during World War II and fuelled nationalist sentiments. Regardless of the introduction of democratic structures, the French would retain political control (Strangio, 2020, p.7).

Nesossi, 2018). Using violence to induce fear created a "chilling effect" (p.111) among opposition forces that prevented them from confronting Sihanouk's entrenched position.

An example of Sihanouk's instrumentalisation of fear and repression to accumulate political power was his crusade with the Democratic Party. He saw the party as an enemy that had to be neutralised rather than a political opponent, which is why members of the Democratic Party were often the target of his political abuse (Chandler, 1993). In the sight of the elections of 1958, some members of the Democratic Party and Sihanouk agreed on a political debate on national issues. However, Sihanouk ended the meeting abruptly and left. On their way out, soldiers of the Palace Guard beat the Democrats, which triggered further episodes of violence over the following days in Phnom Penh (ibid).

Sihanouk tightened "the screws of his parliamentary opponents, convincing or forcing most to abandon to abandon their parties to join the Sangkum, which furnished nearly all candidates for elections held in 1958 and 1962" (Strangio, 2020, p.9). Little by little, many members of the Democratic Party joined the Sangkum (Osborne, 1994), leaving little room for political alternatives to form a strong opposition. For instance, in 1957, one year before the 1958 national elections, the Democratic Party dissolved itself (Kiernan, 2008), and the Sankgum faced no opposition to win the seats in the National Assembly in 1958, 1962, and 1966 (Nohlen, Grotz and Hartmann (Eds), 2001).

Sihanouk's use of fear and repression created a post-colonial illiberal regime that prevented a liberal system based on constitutional guarantees to flourish. The multiparty system and the celebration of elections devised a layer of thin democracy. His selective and occasional kindness with the popular classes gave him plenty of popular support; he used his God-King image to project his belief that he was the only one who truly represented the nation (Chandler, 2012) – which helped him in general elections. However, Sihanouk's use of fear and repression silenced dissenting voices did not ensure constitutional democracy or, in other terms, thick or substantive democracy, paving the way for Sihanouk's undisputed leadership. He projected an image of a strong statesman who did not welcome political opposition, mirroring the colonial state structures to centralise political power.

4.1.2. Internal conflict and civil war

Regardless of Sihanouk's political dominance, his strategy of swiping his opponents instead of looking for consensus created social and political divergences (Moo, 2006). Sihanouk was backed by several social and political elites, businesspeople, and minority groups revering God-king Sihanouk. However, he did not get support from another influential sector of urban elites seeking western-style democracy,

which grew in force, especially when students and urban intellectuals joined that group (Chanda, 1989). Moreover, Sihanouk's lack of political philosophy and the blurred direction of his political actions aggravated the internal divisions (ibid). He accepted the aid of the United States, while he also forged good relationships with the communist block (Strangio, 2020).

In the late 1960s, during the Vietnam War, Sihanouk was convinced that the communist North Vietnamese would prevail over the US-backed government in the South, and he allowed the North Vietnamese troops to use their territory, making Cambodia involved in the Second Indo-China War in 1970 (Race, 1970). Later, the United States sent its troops to South Vietnam, and the US bombings of communist bases in Cambodia began (Keller, 2005). In that context, the existence of a small communist insurgency – which would then become the Khmer Rouge – marked the political developments of the 1970s (Chandler, 1993; Church (Ed), 2009; Strangio, 2012). The communist group exploited the gap between rural and urban classes to spread fear regarding Cambodia's relations with Vietnam to induce fear among people; members of the Khmer Rouge put their nationalistic views at the forefront, emphasising that the expansionist policy of Vietnam posed a threat to Cambodia, which led to the killings of ethnic Vietnamese citizens (Amer, 1994; Chanda, 1989).

In 1970, while Sihanouk was overseas, the National Assembly dismissed him "in what become known in popular memory as a US-backed coup d'etat" (McCabe and Haffner, 2020), led by Lon Nol, who had been Prime Minister of Cambodia until he resigned in 1967 (Osborne, 1994). Sihanouk's dismissal and Lon Nol's leadership marked the beginning of the Khmer Republic. Elections took place. Still, "like its predecessors, was manipulated in favour of the incumbent regime" (Gallup, 2002, p.29). Under Lon Nol's leadership, Cambodia had lost its impartiality concerning the Vietnam war, and the country was being militarised to stop communists from invading the country (Chandler, 1993; Gallup, 2002; Kiernan, 2008; McCabe and Haffner, 2020). The aforementioned internal divisions between the domestic communist insurgence of the Khmer Rouge Republic (backed by the United States and South Vietnam) also contributed to the political instability of the Khmer Republic (supported by the United States and South Vietnam). So, illiberal governance was protracted, and the country's internal tensions escalated to a civil war that would last until 1975 (Chandler, 1993; Kiernan, 2008).

The civil war between communists and the forces of the Khmer Republic resulted in a bloodbath that took the lives of approximately 240,000 people (Śliwinski, 1995), spreading fear and creating trauma among survivors. Moreover, those who survived had to face some side effects of war, such as increasing illiteracy rates due to children dropping out of school, the deteriorating health conditions due to the many people's malnutrition, or widespread corruption (Chandler, 1993), which undermined people's social and political trust. Therefore, the first two decades of post-colonialism did little to build

a free multi-party system. Although elections were celebrated, political liberties and space for political opposition forces were limited. The fact that dissenting political voices were often silenced contributed to perpetuating a climate of political fear and lack of power-sharing tradition (Strangio, 2020) that still affects today's democratic system. Nonetheless, the country was yet to go through the darkest episode in its history when the Khmer Rouge took the country after the defeat of the Khmer Republic.

4.1.3. The Khmer Rouge era and Vietnamese occupation

During the civil war between 1970 and 1975, the Khmer Rouge progressively gained territory taking control of liberated zones while winning the hearts of many rural villagers with their contributions to infrastructure and services (Strangio, 2020, p.13). In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge took Cambodia's capital city Phnom Penh, removed Lon Nol from power, establishing the Democratic Kampuchea – known as "year zero" (Munro, 1979) due to the drastic turn in the country's history. In the early stages of that new regime, the Khmer Rouge cadres evacuated people to the countryside, the country was sealed off and isolated from the rest of the international community, and the infamous Cambodian genocide secretly took place (Chandler, 1993, 2009; Keller, 2005) to purify the Cambodian society along its political lines (Alvarez, 2001). Purges against former political elites and those who supported them resulted in the arrest and often execution of anyone who backed former Cambodian governments, foreign governments, or anyone who had specific skills or the intellect to be seen as a threat to the communist regime (Chandler, 1993, 2009; Kiernan, 2008; Vickery, 1999).

Fear and terror had a salient role in the atrocities that were committed, which "were used to strip away old attitudes and impose new "collective" consciousness" (Strangio, 2020, p.13). I will label fear as multi-directional since it occurred among the political class, civil society, and between civil society and the state sector. On the one hand, fear and distrust happened within the state structures. Many Khmer Rouge cadres often distrusted those in lower positions in the hierarchy, such as regional officials – who were seen as potential betrayers, thus resulting in occasional purges (Hinton, 1998). On the other hand, fear and lack of trust among citizens were not uncommon either. In their case, fear was bottom-up or vertical since those who did not follow the doctrine of the Angkar[13] feared being arrested and repressed by the Khmer Rouge cadres (Southerland, 2006) – below, I detail the number

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[13] In Khmer language, it means "organisation" and it was the named used to refer to the Communist Party during the Pol Pot regime.

of victims. Moreover, confrontations between those who followed the doctrine of the Angkar and those who did were not unusual. The former was indoctrinated to see the latter as capitalists who did not want to join the revolution, thus like enemies of the system who had to be reported to the Angkar (Southerland, 2006). So, fear was also horizontal or among people, leading to a profound political and social division among citizens, betrayals, arrests, deaths, and widespread fear and distrust. As Southerland (2006) notes,

> Loung Ung, author of the book *First They Killed My Father*[14], was a five-year-old child when she and her family were forced to evacuate Phnom Penh. She was sent to a work camp for orphans. Both her father and mother were executed as "class enemies."
>
> Ung was taught to hate the Vietnamese, who became enemy number one after the Khmer Rouge took power. Child soldiers were taught to "follow orders without hesitation," according to Ung, even to the point of shooting and killing their own "traitor parents" if necessary" (n.p).

With this example, Southerland shows how trust was deliberately undercut, stressing the absolute centrality of the Angkar. Moreover, Cambodia's society was divided. Its members did not trust each other (horizontal distrust) and feared that fellow citizens could betray them. Fear was also bottom-up since people feared a mysterious, but powerful Angkar that could demote, imprison, or kill them (Kiernan, 2008). A further consequence of prolonged exposure to episodes of violence was that many people were desensitised and normalised the use of force (Southerland, 2006). Finally, fear of external agents like the US and its bombardments was common (Chandler, 1993). Therefore, fear was also going outwards.

The atrocities that were committed resulted in deep social wounds. On the one hand, the number of victims. Kiernan (2003) estimates that victims were between 1.67 and 1.87 million, between 21% and 24% of the total population. However, these and other figures have been disputed due to the impossibility of tracking the total number of victims buried in mass graves or those who disappeared. Usually, the number of victims in several studies rages between 1 and 3 million. On the other hand, the social and economic repercussions, the consequences of which are still felt today. The scars of the genocide were not limited to the number of victims, which also included low fertility, low marriage rates, and low educational attainment are some examples (de Walque, 2006) that shaped the sample for this study, which I have described in Chapter 3.

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[14] See Ung, 2016.

The end of the Democratic Kampuchea arrived in 1979 when Vietnam – backed by the Soviets – occupied Cambodia, pushed the Khmer Rouge to the margins of the country and established the People's Republic of Kampuchea (Gottesman, 2004; Keller, 2005). Vietnam appointed some former Khmer Rouge members who had defected to Vietnam to form a new government in Cambodia. Hun Sen was one of those officials. He fled to Vietnam in 1977 and rapidly emerged as a prominent political figure among those whom Hanoi had appointed to lead the country – he was named Prime Minister in 1985 at the age of 31 (Morgenbesser, 2018; Strangio, 2020), and as of today[15], he is still Cambodia's prime minister.

> For the first time since the end of the French protectorate in the 1950s, Cambodia was controlled by a foreign power. The state's situation was similar to the final years of the French protectorate insofar as Vietnam took responsibility for Cambodia's defence, internal security and foreign affairs, leaving less crucial areas – from their point of view – in Cambodian hands (Keller, 2005, p.136).

Vietnam established a dictatorial government in Cambodia that offered minimal rights to its citizens – no elections were held until 1981, and those were not contested by any opposition party (Strangio, 2020). Like in previous regimes, fear played a salient role. Clayton (1999) describes a remarkable degree of cooperation between Cambodian citizens and Vietnamese authorities that could respond to an ideological fraternity or anticipation of power or wealth. However, that level of collaboration, he argues, was informed by the culture of fear that existed during those years, which characterised the Vietnamese rule in Cambodia. Through several examples of power dynamics between citizens and officials, some of Clayton's informants related their fear of reprisal – like going to prison – if they did something wrong.

> [They believed] in that possibility – 'be careful or you will end up in prison!' – illustrates the coercive atmosphere of the occupation and explains at least in part their co-operation with the Vietnamese. Quite simply, they were afraid that a non-co-operative posture would be severely punished. Doubtless this belief was conditioned by other events that occurred during the Vietnamese occupation, notably the imprisonment of Pen Sovan and the death of Chan Sy, Hanoi Khmer who became leaders in the Cambodian party and government after 1979 (Clayton, 1999, p.357).

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[15] In March 2021.

Therefore, under Vietnamese rule, fear was still being instrumentalised to gain political control. Pen Sovann, who served as prime minister of Cambodia of the Hanoi-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea until 1981, was arrested and imprisoned for pushing back against Vietnamese control. Using high-profile cases of Cambodian politicians allowed Vietnamese elites to induce fear among dissenting voices and citizens to prevent opposition to challenge the political status quo – in Chapter 6, I will show that this pattern still applies today with the help of social media. The Vietnamese occupation protracted conflict in Cambodia until 1989, when the Vietnamese troops withdrew due to a multiparty negotiation between factions and the international community (Strangio, 2020).

To sum up, this section began with my experience during fieldwork to highlight the importance of political fear in the current political landscape in Cambodia. Colonialism provides the necessary context to show that fear is an old issue in the country. The colonial era consolidated imposed illiberal state structures based on power being centralised in the hands of political elites. The post-colonial political leaders inherited those structures, crushing dissenting voices and other political forces and sending the message that there was little room for political opposition. Thus, making civil society afraid to engage in politics.

Fear and lack of trust were common traits in all post-colonial regimes. Leaders like Sihanouk used it to wipe out his political opponents, while groups like the Khmer Rouge used fear to portray "other" social groups as a threat to the regime's stability. That triggered horizontal fear among people, and bottom-up fear, from civil society to the state sector. The use of fear shaped public life and undermined Cambodia's political plurality, thus shrinking people's changes for meaningful political participation, allowing political leaders to gain power and reinforce their dominance sending the message that political opposition is unwanted (Gel'man, 2015). So, fear and lack of trust from the 1950s are deeply rooted in the political happenings during those decades and in the previous colonial rule.

In the next section, I give an account of Cambodia's transition to democracy after Vietnam pulled out of the country. More importantly, I show how, regardless of Cambodia's transition to democracy, illiberalism and political fear persisted.

4.2. The perpetuation of political fear and distrust in the democratic era

In 1989, Vietnam withdrew its troops, and Cambodia initiated its democratic transition. In 1991, a milestone was reached, and the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) were established, which formally re-established peace and marked the beginning of a new democratic era (Chandler, 2009; Strangio, 2020).

This section builds on the previous one and contextualises political fear in Cambodia from the PPA until the late 2000s and early 2010s when digital media was popularised in the country – a period that I will address in the next chapter. Below, I show that the culture of fear was perpetuated in the peaceful era, harming democracy. On the one hand, democratic mechanisms were successfully established. Hence, the success of thin or procedural democracy. On the other hand, the implementation of such was relatively poor, which did not contribute positively to the development of thick or substantive democracy. Given the limited positive reach of a thin-tick democratic system, Cambodia slid into new authoritarianism or illiberal democracy.

4.2.1. Violence and fear after the Paris Peace Agreements

After Vietnam pulled out of Cambodia in 1989, the United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC) was established to ensure parties maintained their ceasefire (United Nations, 2003). In 1992, those functions were subsumed by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), which would supervise the implementation of PAA, the aim of which was to restore peace establish a political system based on the western idea of liberal democracy (Strangio, 2020).

However, hopes for a complete and peaceful transition to democracy quickly vanished, the initial years of Cambodia's democratic transition were still marked by fear and violence. Hun Sen, who exercised individual and collective control over the military and security force policy and practices, prepared a series of attacks to intimidate and scare the members of opposition forces, such as the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCIPEC) [16] and the Buddhist Libera Democratic Party, ahead of the upcoming elections of 1993 (Adams, 2015). The final UNTAC (1993) report summarises the CPP atrocities, including the attacks against political opposition parties and affiliated groups. As Adams (2015) puts it:

> The report stated that the PRK's successor, the State of Cambodia (SOC), the new official name given to the country as part of a rebranding exercise by the ruling party in advance of elections, was responsible for 39 incidents of "killing of political opponents" that resulted in 46 "casualties," as well 25 "killings the primary purpose of which is to intimidate the civilian population and other summary executions" that resulted in 40 "casualties". The report listed hundreds of other cases of SOC abuses, including enforced disappearances and torture […].

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[16] The acronym FUNCINPEC derives from the French Front uni national pour un Cambodge indépendant, neutre, pacifique et coopératif. The FUNCINPEC was founded by Norodom Sihanouk in 1981 while in exile.

> Information gathered by UNTAC showed that those who committed abuses, including the police and army, operated as direct agents of the ruling CPP under ministerial-level instructions as well as under the direction of provincial, district, commune and village officials. The perpetrators were involved both in intelligence-gathering activities directed at opposition political parties and individuals connected to those parties, and in suppressing the political activities of the opposition (p.30).

That climate of violence to suppress political opposition was a lost opportunity for civil society to build a substantive type of democracy backed by political liberties. A persistent environment of fear did not allow citizens to engage in politics beyond elections and develop their political mindsets without feeling intimidated by the violent actions of the CPP. Still, regardless of the use of violence and fear, the CPP did not win the first democratic elections of 1993. "The CPPC expected an easy victory" (Strangio, 2020, p.58), but "when the votes were counted, the victory belonged to the FUNCINPEC. The party clinched 45.5% of the vote, followed by the CPP's 38.2% […]" (ibid). Maybe, just like Sihanouk in the 1940s, Hun Sen felt that he was a dispensable leader too, and that being appointed by Hanoi to be PM in 1985 – along with his use of fear, threats, and violence – was not enough to wins people's votes. Hun Sen and the CPP responded with more threats and instrumentalised fear to gain Cambodia's political control. The party claimed that those elections had been fraudulent, and more UNTAC members were attacked. Given the CPP's display of strength, the FUNCINPEC and the CPP agreed on a coalition government between Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen (Strangio, 2020).

The UNTAC era showed that the initial stages of Cambodia's peaceful era did not consolidate democratic rule. The flaws of the new system were evident in 1997 when co-Prime Minister Hun Sen staged a violent coup to oust his co-prime minister, putting forward their permanent political disagreements and inability to share power (Strangio, 2020). That was a traditional coup executed by an external agent to government, but still, a coup due to the force used against a democratically elected government (Adams, 2015; Kiernan, 2008; Peou, 1998a), and one of the most ruthless power displays that Hun Sen has ever exhibited. International watchdogs immediately labelled the country as "non-free" (Freedom House, 1998).

The coup evidenced that fear was still being political instrumentalised, and Hun Sen had used it in two ways to maintain his political grip. First, his actions generated intra-party fear. Evidence indicated that the coup was arranged by Hun Sen and *not* the CPP as a political body (Adams, 2007). That intimidated the CPP member who did not support the use of force, "causing deep strains in the party. After the coup, many senior CPP officials who refused to participate sandbagged their homes and put their guards on full alert, fearful that Hun Sen would then strike against them for their disloyalty" (n.p). Hun

Sen had shown he was not afraid of confronting his most direct political opponents – including his party colleagues if necessary – even if they had been democratically elected.

Second, Hun Sen's actions propagated fear among citizens since the use of violence exacerbated people's trauma after decades of authoritarian rule and conflict, as an activist noted (r3.27). Hun Sen's rough strategies to gain political power during the 1990s showed that Cambodia was under a democratic façade that consisted of elections – thin democracy. That façade hid illiberal practices, taking a toll on thick democracy since those attacked signalled that political pluralism would be opposed violently. Hence, civil society's limited opportunities to create horizontal structures to engage in politics and maintain a positive relationship with the state sector. Thomas Hammarberg, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Human Rights in Cambodia, said he was "concerned about the atmosphere of fear and intimidation which now [1997] prevails in Cambodia. Few people believe that it is safe to express their views publicly" (Adams, 2015, p.40).

In the aftermath of the 1997 coup, direct violence had *relatively* decreased. As scheduled, Cambodia celebrated multi-party elections every five years, maintaining a procedural democracy with little room for political alternatives to the CPP. Cases of harassment and intimidation against politically dissenting voices persisted, like people's and organisations fear to speak out against Hun Sen and the CPP (Adams, 2007, 2015). Cambodia's initial experience with democracy was bitter-sweet. Thin democracy developed; democratic institutions had been put in place, and elections were celebrated regularly. Still, that was far from the thin-thick approach to democracy that I outlined in Chapter 2. The political pressure that the CPP put in the political sphere kept fear alive, limiting people's political liberties to engage in politics uncoerced and develop horizontal structures to participate in actions of non-traditional political participation. Attacks like those of 1997 conveyed that only Hun Sen could rule the country (Heder, 1995; Paris, 2004; Shenon, 1993; Strangio, 2020), dispelling liberal democracy and sliding Cambodia into illiberal democracy.

4.2.2. New authoritarianism

Cambodia's new democratic experience worked only to a certain extent, and the country slid towards new authoritarianism[17]. Old and new authoritarian regimes are *de facto* one-party states. They create an uneven distribution of political power between actors – especially between civil society and state – leading to top-down power dynamics, weak governmental accountability, and despots who do not seek consensus with opposition forces (Somer, 2016).

Still, a significant difference between the two is that new autocrats use democratic institutions and legal measures to subvert constitutional constraints on their power (Horley, Meng and Versteeg, 2020; King, 2009). They use *subtle* strategies to extend their dominance and monopolise power, which generally involves building a democratic façade to hide an ill-system of governance to subvert and take advantage of democratic mechanisms (King, 2009; Puddington, 2017). For example, new authoritarian regimes celebrate elections, but these tend to be rigged and not free – or fair (Cheeseman and Klaas, 2018).

Voting can make citizens feel politically relevant and decisive. They believe their votes shape public institutions when, in fact, opposition parties have virtually no chance of obtaining significant representation. Celebrating elections also legitimises autocrats, who gain control of legislative and executive branches, the judiciary, media, civil society, security forces, or the economy (Somer, 2016). As Cheeseman and Klass (2018) argue, celebration elections help autocrats remaining longer in power compared to those in countries where no elections are arranged. Therefore, as Puddington (2017) notes, when democratic institutions are under an autocrat's almost absolute control, government changes through elections are nearly unachievable. Furthermore, the lack of civil and political rights generates inequality between civil society and the state sector, with the potential for clientelism, corruption, and the governmental co-optation of media to control the political narrative (Somer, 2016).

As I have pointed out earlier, fear is often instrumental as a political tool for strategic purposes in free and non-free societies. It plays a salient role in the politics of authoritarian regimes. "These governments strove to dissolve or isolate civil society institutions capable of protecting or insulating citizens from state power" (Corradi, Fagen and Garretón Merino (Eds), 1992, p.2). Violence and the erosion of public values or social bonds are recurrent strategies that debilitate civil society in contexts of political fear (ibid). In Cambodia, the culture of fear that the CPP perpetuated contributed to

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[17] Different authors have used different terms for the same idea: "new authoritarianism" (Krastev, 2011, p.5); "modern authoritarianism" (Puddington, 2017: 1); or "neo-authoritarianism" (Petracca and Xiong, 1990, p.1099).

creating a new authoritarian regime. Below, I outline Cambodia's weak electoral democracy and people's limited constitutional rights after the PPA were established. Together, these two characteristics give an account of Cambodia's weak democratic consolidation after 1991.

Robust electoral democracy

The standard view among my informants was that they were active participants in public life. Still, interviews also revealed that their active engagement mainly was through elections. Here, I contend that, although most participants showed considerable interest in politics, fear and lack of trust had limited their democratic experience to casting a ballot in local and national elections and that constitutional democracy was minimal.

Interviews revealed that most respondents were interested in politics, but only a minority liked politics. I asked everyday citizens to quantify their political interest between 0 (null interest) and 10 (very interested). Out of 24 respondents, the average interest was 6/10, but only four said they "liked" talking about politics. The spokespeople of some CSOs expressed similar views to what I found out in my sample and said that citizens do not like talking about politics, but they tend to be interested in it. During the conversation with my informants, it was evident that many of them did not feel exceptionally comfortable talking to me about politics – other factors like power dynamics or their distrust towards me might have contributed to that. Nonetheless, when respondents understood I was impartial, and I was not judging them, most were grateful for the opportunity to express their political views. None of them asked to stop the interview. So, even if respondents said they disliked politics, it did not mean they were politically disengaged. As I show in Chapter 6, people's political discussion in the private sphere was a widely practised and tangible form of political engagement.

The mainstream view of my participants was that electoral democracy is the cornerstone of civic life in Cambodia, and elections are the only chance citizens have so they can express their political views. Participants said that choosing their representatives had consequences on their daily lives. They perceived elections as an important civic action in which they must participate. Otherwise, "things go wrong" (r2.04). Another informant (r2.03) was more specific and said that people must vote to keep their politicians accountable because "if our politicians are not good, that affects my job" (r2.03). The vitality of elections among respondents that (r2.03) and (r2.04) exemplified is also seen through remarkably high voter's turnouts in national elections since 1993.

Table 3 - Voter turnout in national elections between 1993 and 2018

Year	Voter turnout	
1993	89.5%	(Nohlen, Grotz and Hartmann (Eds), 2001)
1998	90%	(Peou, 1998b)
2003	83.2%	(EU Election Observation Mission, 2003)
2008	75%	(COMFREL, 2008)
2013	69.6%	(McCargo, 2018)
2018	80.4%	(ibid)

Participants valued elections so much that even those who were not interested in politics used to vote. For example, one citizen (2.12) provided definite answers that showed his null interest in politics. "I am not interested in the news about Cambodia. […] I don't know about politics… it all depends on the Government". His answer denoted political apathy and placed all the political responsibility in the hands of the state sector. Still, he said he was a political party member and that he voted for it. On the flip side, I identified some young respondents who had increasingly become sceptic towards the transparency of elections. These young citizens acknowledged the importance of elections, but they also questioned their efficacy. That was the case of (2.16), who said that "last time I did not vote. I think that, even if I vote, the results are still the same. It's not a democracy here" (r2.16). Another informant (r2.11) said that "as a Khmer citizen, I want to use my voice to vote, but the problem is that when I go voting, the results are always the same. So, it is useless. Even if I try, nothing changes, and the results are still the same" (r2.11). These two citizens showed their scepticism towards elections.

Voter turnouts and the views of some citizens (r2.16; r2.11) show that *thin* democracy is the cornerstone of Cambodia's political system. However, some informants showed frustration towards that mechanism because results were "always the same" (r2.11), raising doubts on how appropriately elections reflect people's political will, the political system itself and, more crucially, what is lost when thick democracy is hardly present. The fact that only some of the youngest informants with higher education questioned the system of checks and balances indicates different participation patterns among informants – for example, in section 5.1.3, I address the age split and participation. It is also remarkable to mention that, given the county's relationship with the politics of fear, none of the

informants was fearful of voting. That reinforces the overall positive perception that respondents had about electoral democracy.

Weak constitutional democracy

In a new authoritarian regime, illiberal practices happen through more subtle and sophisticated strategies that allow political elites to atomising political power in their hands behind a democratic façade. In Cambodia, elections play a vital role in building this façade or democratic illusion, which hides weak constitutional democracy.

Neopatrimonialism undermines constitutional democracy in Cambodia (Pak et al., 2007; Un, 2005). In its original form, patrimonialism entails personal relationships in governance (Pitcher, Moran and Johnston, 2009; Scott, 1972); informal rules have a salient role, and the legal system is undermined (Hyden, 1997). Neopatrimonialism becomes a predatory yet subtle strategy for social and political control that creates vertical and often democratically ineffective governance (Spirin and Lührman, 2018). Colonialism reshaped patrimonial networks, resulting in its modern form or neopatrimonialism. Its distinctive trait is that it extends alongside a bureaucratic logic (Hyden, 1997). According to Bratton and van de Walle (1997), neopatrimonialism displays political clientelism, strong political leaders, and corruption. Regarding political clientelism, it is a practice that adulterates political participation (Roniger et al., 2004, pp.353–354), which consists of "take here, give there" (p.353). So, patrons and clients establish a power relationship through which patrons give clients access to resources they usually are deprived of. In return, clients pay back with their political support. Consequently, political clientelism is a significant factor that adulterates the quality of political participation (ibid).

In Cambodia, PM Hun Sen and members of the CPP have used clientelism to accumulate large amounts of political power since the party counts on a network of close collaborators with high-ranking positions within the CPP and the state apparatus. Their position of power allows them to work on the shadow of the legal system that, in theory, is based on the separation of powers (Pak et al., 2007). That allowed them to obtain political gains, especially in rural areas. To achieve this,

> the CPP continues to send party cadres to the rural heartland, a tactic known as *choh moulthan* (going down to the base) – a common policy in the 1980s. In the communist era of the 1980s party cadres brought party propaganda in an effort to raise people's revolutionary spirit to fight the return of the Khmer Rouge and to build socialism. Under hybrid democracy, the CPP cadres bring donations and promises of even more donations should the district vote for their party (Un, 2005, p.221).

So, the CPP's patron-client networks, especially in the rural provinces[18] where the concentration of population is higher, made the party politically dominant in the country. Most of Hun Sen's collaborators are business tycoons known as *oknhas*, who contribute to developmental projects and establish an "elite pact" (Verver and Dahles, 2015) with the Government (Hun Sen, mostly). Local patrons establish small, face-to-face networks that provide clients (ordinary citizens) with money, clothes, or infrastructure in exchange for political support. This way, local patrons obtain recognition, protection, and privileges from the CPP (Baaz and Lilja, 2014; Chandler, 2009; Jacobsen, 2008; Roberts, 2001).

The two remaining features of neopatrimonialism that van de Walle (1997) points out, strong leaders and corruption, can be described as consequences of political clientelism and the consequent imbalance of power. On the one hand, the power dynamics that are created between patrons and clients result in an imbalance of power in favour of patrons. Patrons benefit from instrumentalising fear and using coercive methods to achieve their political aims, often taking advantage of the vulnerable situation of their clients, who may have precarious lives and need extra income and resources. That legitimises the power of elites and reinforces an illiberal and weak democratic system since clients have no choice but to vote for the ruling party. As Petersson (2017) observes, the network of regional patrons has modernised patronage politics in Cambodia. It has become a "mass-patronage system where members of the political elites survive by protecting each other, not the people" (p.53), thus worsening the power imbalance. On the other hand, clients seek to please their patrons (and vice-versa) to keep spheres of influence functioning. That generates localised and blatant corruption cases, indiscernible cases of harassment, material inducements, or bribery to obtain official documents and do business (Un, 2020; Pak et al., 2007; Vuković and Babović, 2018).

Neopatrimonialism is vital to understand Cambodian politics after the PPA. It emerged as a form of social and political control in which patrons are motivated by their gains and influence political behaviour and voting preferences to accomplish them (Pak et al., 2007; Un, 2005). Therefore, they need democratic mechanisms like the multiparty elections that the PPA provided to obtain personal gains. However, voter-buying flaws elections and weakens civil society (Fox, 2007). Furthermore, top-down accountability decreases as the state sector become less accountable to people. Still, clients remain accountable to their patrons and their interests (Vuković and Babović, 2018).

The lack of constitutional democracy due to neopatrimonialism took a toll on liberal democracy. More specifically, it damaged thick or substantive democracy and made elections less meaningful.

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[18] Rural provinces have traditionally been strongholds of the CPP.

Neopatrimonialism interfered with the basic principle that civil society is a separate entity from the state – even if links between the two are necessary – and challenged the creation of horizontal political structures that would result in a robust civil society capable of keeping the government accountable. That challenged the development of thick democracy, placing most of the weight of democracy on flawed elections.

The theory of democratisation by elections sustains that even flawed multi-party systems are beneficial for democracy because they increase the costs of repression and lower the costs of toleration (Lindberg (Ed), 2009; Schedler, 2002). So, subverting popular sovereignty becomes more difficult because there is a higher tolerance for democratic processes. Morgenbesser (2017) found out that after the celebration of five general elections[19] in Cambodia, the costs of repression had increased and that tolerance costs had decreased. However, he also found out that neopatrimonialism has been a decisive factor that halted Cambodia's democratisation. The problem is that

> the distribution of patronage antecedes questions of legitimacy [...]. To the extent the regime seeks legitimation, then, it does so by fulfilling its obligations as the chief patron of Cambodian society, rather than appealing to any underlying beliefs in popular sovereignty (p.149).

The neopatrimonialism networks created through most of the 1990s and 2000s shaped the democratic system that was put in place in 1991, becoming a minimalist type of democracy at the expense of substantive democracy, emphasising non-traditional political participation alongside elections. Lack of opportunities to consolidate a well organised and solid political opposition empowered the CPP, making people afraid of reprisals should they oppose it – many citizens were still traumatised after decades of conflict or inherited fear from older people. That widened the power gap between civil society and the state, consolidating Hun Sen's rule through flawed elections. The developing context created after the PPA were crucial because it shaped the political scene that digital media and social media platforms like Facebook hoped to make a difference – which I examine in the following chapters.

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[19] After the PPA, elections took place in 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008 and 2013. The elections of 2018 took place after Morgenbesser's study was published.

4.2.3. Fear under new authoritarianism

The culture of fear was essential for the ruling party CPP to consolidate its political dominance. Here, I examine how fear was created and spread among people. First, I look at the ability of the state sector to induce fear among people and, second, I sustain that some older citizens transmitted fear to younger people. In other words, fear became transgenerational.

As I have shown with the cases of violence and intimidation right following the implementation of the PPA and the first democratic elections, fear had a salient role in intimidating opposition parties. Still, fear was not exclusive to that short period, and the neopatrimonialism structures of the new authoritarian regimes allowed the CPP to keep using fear to gain political power. That happened, at least, in two ways. First, the state sector uses high-profile and low-profile cases to generate fear among people and widen the power gap that patronage politics creates between state authorities and citizens – below, I present Dr Kem Ley's case. Respondents also described the power gap between the state sector and civil society as limiting their political liberty to sympathise with alternative political forces. For example, (r2.07) and (r2.01) complained that "the Government is too powerful" (r2.07), especially in villages where chiefs "has power to tell people what do to and how to think" (r2.01). Informants (r2.01; r2.03; r2.06; r2.07; r2.10; r2.11) expressed that they feared governmental reprisals if they publicly shared their disagreements with the ruling party. Some of them referred to the assassination of Dr Kem Ley – a well-known and mediatic political analyst, critic with the ruling party, who often appeared in the media. In 2016, he was shot in a petrol station a few days after he had criticised Hun Sen's government while he was on air in a radio program. One man was arrested over a money dispute with Kem Ley, but that case heightened the tensions between opposition parties and the Government (Holmes and Carothers, 2016; Norén-Nilsson, 2018). One informant (r2.06) who referred to that case said that:

> You know Kem Ley, he talked about politics, he said something that makes sense, he
> says what he wanted to say about politics to the citizens, and I think that he spoke
> truthfully. After that, he died because someone killed him. So, I think that maybe it's
> the real thing [sic]. I am scared of the Government (r2.06).

Informants like (r2.06) did not want to confront members of powerful elites since they feared facing negative consequences if they did. "The fear of approaching government officials and the gap between citizens and power holders have not yet been reduced" (Vuković and Babović, 2018: 155). That is due to the power imbalance between the two and cultural issues such as fear of upsetting those with a

higher social position (Un, 2015; Vuković and Babović, 2018). Therefore, using fear allows political elites to maintain their political dominance over most citizens.

The state also uses low-profile actions at a local level to induce fear among people and gain power. For example, a civil society leader (r3.08) who arranged small civic and political activities explained that when he organised activities that gathered citizens and other members of civil society, local authorities would often show up to check what they were doing. He added that they want to scare and dissuade participants – and they usually accomplish it. That is especially frequent in rural areas, where privacy is more difficult to ensure, so local authorities can quickly identify them. As (r3.08) explained, that shrinks people's spaces to talk about politics. Thus, creating thick democracy is challenging.

> The space is not open. Politically, if your action has been seen by the ruling party or elites as an activity that threatens their position, they will crush you right away, they will shut you down. But there are activities you can do that they do not perceive as a threat to their power. We organised many activities and we bring in up to 400 people – students, parents, etc. – and we talk about mindset, how to raise a future leader… there a lot of people involved, and nobody came to stop us. Politically, the space is not really open (r3.08).

The increased difficulty to host open political discussion due to people's fear of being caught by their local authorities does not allow the public sphere to widen. Consequently, the power gap between people and authorities is perpetuated. So, most people tend to avoid political discussions because they fear the potential consequences. A significant difference between high-profile cases like Kem Ley's and cases at a local level is that, in the former, people are paranoid because of the news they receive. In the latter, local authorities try to scare them directly. In both cases, fear made people reluctant to engage in politics beyond voting. As (r2.04) said, "if you ignore anything that can be seen as political, then you can live peacefully. I am not rich, but I live decently thanks to my job. This is enough… only if you ignore politics" (r2.04). That probably explains some respondents' reluctance to talk to me initially.

The state sector's second strategy to maintain its political dominance is cultivating a culture of fear and distrust. As (r3.08) pointed out, "they [Government officials] try to nurture a culture of distrust, a culture of colouring each other, a culture of hate and division" (r3.08). Like in the Khmer Rouge era, fear is multi-directional.

> The level of trust towards the Government has been very low. From people to the Government, and even among people in the government because the system is not built on trust or rule of law. They have created factions in the Government. Inside the system, they have different levels of trust. And the same for the society. We have small groups that we can trust – like friends – that we can call for whatever, but it's a very small network (r1.06).

A divided society results in citizens who trust less each other, thus less likely to share their political views because they fear the potential negative consequences of confronting citizens who stand on the other end of the political spectrum. For example, (r2.19) said that "normally I do not express my opinions to the public because I do not know who is like me and who is not. I only express my opinion to those I trust or those whom I share interests with". Other informants made more explicit references to fear, such as (r3.01), who said that "usually, people do not talk about politics unless they know each other. Many of us can talk about other things, but not about politics. People are afraid" (r3.01). Another participant, (2.04), went a bit further and blamed the ruling party for such insecurities and said that:

> Yes [I am afraid]. If you start talking to someone and you do were not aware the other person supports another party… well, none of opposition parties scare us, only one scares us. Then you change your narrative… you must speak good things about the Government (r2.04).

Finally, the Government warns about political chaos and unrest should an opposition party win the elections to induce fear. As I explained in section 4.1, many of the cues used by the CPP to cause fear related to the atrocities committed during the Khmer Rouge regime. An INGO representative stated:

> They [Government officials] usually go back to the Khmer Rouge to create an atmosphere of fear, saying that we have been through the Khmer Rouge regime, the killings… and now I [Government] am doing the right thing… If you want to change to a new government, you might go back to that (r3.26).

Using cues recalling the Khmer Rouge is a clear example of the politics of fear to obtain political gain. This strategy is particularly effective because the 1970s are still relatively fresh among survivors and because "I think that there are so many people who are still scared of the wartime in Cambodia… which is why they tend to agree with whatever the government is saying. I [people] still feel a lot of fear, and they just don't want to go through the conflict of period again" (r3.05), an activist explained.

So, as I have shown, the Government plays a crucial role in inducing fear. Still, as I show below, fear also emerges within families.

Finally, the culture of fear and distrust is also cultivated within families. So, the Government is not the only one responsible for it. Life experiences of those who experience war and conflict explain their fears and trauma. In post-conflict societies like Rwanda, fear and lack of trust are common. That leads to a deteriorated political climate, worsened public life, and "problems in ensuring their collective independent voice vis-à-vis government" (Hintjens, 2018, p.12), and Cambodia has not been any exception (Chhim, 2013).

Politically speaking, the impact of fear on people's behaviour is remarkable. When people find themselves in a situation of fear, they respond to fear with symptoms that develop into generalised distress, even more fear, and mistrust in the most severe cases. That results in demoralised and politically passive citizens who are often reluctant to stand for their political rights (ibid). That is problematic because such a passive attitude legitimises autocrats, and victims' abuse increases. A respondent cited in Kidron and Kirmayer's (2019) research said that

> Cambodians are afraid to talk about politics or openly criticize the government. We are afraid that the war will be resumed. We are afraid to live in misery again. So... we are not interested in current politics. Whoever runs the country does not matter anymore. We do not want to hear or seek to know. We are not interested in the destiny of our country. We do not want to express our opinion (p.221).

What is relevant about those with a passive attitude towards politics is their capacity to transmit their fear and reluctance to participate in politics to others. Research has also shown that fear can be transmitted – *not inherited* – to younger generations (Scharf, 2007; Schwab, 2010; Volkan, 2001). In the Cambodian case, older generations can transmit their *baksbat* to their grandchildren. Along with the current practises of the Government to induce fear, that explains why some of the youngest informants were also scared of politics, even if they were born way after the end of the conflict.

For example, one informant (r2.06) in her mid-20s had moved from the countryside to Phnom Penh to attend university and find a job. Her family educated her "not to care about politics because we [family members] cannot do anything [to influence politics]" (r2.06). Moreover, it can be "a dangerous practice" (ibid). However, when in Phnom Penh, she learnt the value of political engagement. Today, she stays updated on the latest political developments and participates in several political actions beyond voting regularly. The case of (r2.06) explains the connection between fear in the past and

today. It also explains why I perceived fear as a well-embedded feeling in many of my informants, including those born in the post-conflict decades.

4.3. Conclusion

In the literature review, I stressed that democracy is a highly context-sensitive concept. Even if democracy´s normative account is relatively universal, its application is not, and it is subject to circumstantial settings. Hence, the need to highlight underexplored factors shaping political participation and democracy in illiberal settings. This chapter has done so with the culture of political fear and distrust in Cambodia. The context provided is essential because it builds the political landscape that new technology hoped to change in the early 2010s.

The primary outcome is that fear, and lack of trust are highly relevant in the current political landscape. Fear and distrust are rooted in the rule of two solid political leaders that inherited foreign, illiberal state apparatuses to consolidate their political grip while perpetuating illiberal governance. Norodom Sihanouk inherited the illiberal colonial state apparatus to build a personalist state with illiberal traits, using fear to coerce and intimidate his political opponents. That undermined the purpose of democratic elections, preventing the development of thick or substantive democracy. After the Paris Peace Agreements were signed in 1991, Hun Sen became the next strongman of the country. He had been appointed prime minister under Hanoi's rule in Cambodia. He used the network he had built as part of Cambodia's political elite to achieve a nearly hegemonic political dominance after restoring peace in 1991.

Both leaders projected themselves as leaders who ended the foreign occupation in Cambodia. Still, a fundamental difference between these two leaders was that Sihanouk could not manage the country's political divisions. Eventually, those resulted in internal conflict, authoritarian rule, and foreign occupation that triggered further fear and distrust between people and political elites. On the other hand, Hun Sen used political fear and nurtured a culture of distrust in the shadow of a flawed democratic system that he used to build a democratic façade hiding illiberal practices. As a result, he faced no great political opposition, and, as of today, he is still Cambodia's prime minister.

The second outcome from this chapter is that the new authoritarian regime built after 1991 ensured the culture of fear and distrust and resulted in a power gap between civil society and the state sector and a weak democratic system. Multiparty elections have been celebrated regularly since 1993. However, fear and a culture of distrust, which often benefits from traumatise survivors, undermined

constitutional democracy. The existence of neopatrimonialism networks and the culture of fear diluted people's political freedoms and, consequently, forms of political engagement beyond voting in elections – essential to maintain the democratic façade in a new authoritarian regime. Fear has not undermined electoral democracy, which was highly praised and practised and practised among informants. However, fear has dismissed non-traditional participation, which informants hardly practised. These findings align with the argument contending that survivors of traumatising experiences are more likely to engage in electoral politics (Bali, 2007; Rose, Murphy and Abrahms, 2007) and that trust is a necessary element to generate participation (Norris, 2011; Nye, 1997), especially non-traditional participation.

Altogether, I have shown that new authoritarianism in Cambodia did not allow democracy to flourish. Chapter 2 showed that the thin-thick approach to democracy allows making the most of a democratic system because it emphasises political liberties' role in making uncoerced and unconditional choices in elections. Under the current illiberal system, that is not possible. Under a climate of fear and distrust, the rule of law is diluted, and people's political liberties cannot be taken for granted. That makes elections less meaningful and legitimises the authority of the elites already in place, thus creating a power gap between the two. Then, Cambodia's democracy could be described as thin rather than thick, thus making it a weak state (Barber, 2009).

Concerning this study, these outputs contribute to the overall argument in two ways. First, political fear and lack of trust answer the first secondary research question, "what are some of the specific contextual elements that influence political participation in today´s illiberal Cambodia?". Moreover, this chapter's political context is essential to understand the relevance of the popularisation of digital media in the early 2010s. Research has shown that digital media poses a threat to illiberal regimes (Stocchetti, 2007, p.23). Cases like the Arab Spring in North Africa or the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan showed (Anderson, 2013; Rowen, 2015) that people found a new way to engage in politics in digital media. In Cambodia, that is highly relevant because studies have shown that survivors of traumatising experiences are more likely to engage in alternative forms of political action (Bateson, 2012; Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009). So, embracing new variables that can explain how people overcome their fear to engage in non-traditional forms of participation is necessary (Ley Gutierrez, 2014). The next chapter incorporates digital tools and media as a variable in the political landscape to explain how it challenged the culture of fear.

5. From a digital spring to a political crackdown

> *Yes, I am scared. I think that both on and offline spaces are dangerous. I try not to speak out or say anything against the Government. I am scared of being caught (r2.07).*

When I moved to Phnom Penh in 2013, I witnessed Cambodia's digital revolution that had begun in the very late 2000s and early 2010s first-hand. As I will argue in this chapter, it has been the most remarkable political shift since the coup in 1997 and the establishment of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991. Since day one, I noticed that many citizens' intensive use of their smartphones. For instance, some people owned two and even three devices – those who could afford it had multiple SIM cards from various mobile operators to call at the cheapest rates possible at different times. I also noticed that Facebook was the most popular social media platform; it was trendy and seemed to be the new default tool for communication many people had adopted.

The national elections of 2013 were about to happen just three weeks after my arrival to the country. That was the fifth time Cambodian citizens had to elect their representatives to the National Assembly since 1993. Several parties organised mass political rallies, and, more than once, I found myself surrounded by members of the crowd that supported their parties. The events organised by the ruling party CPP, led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, and the largest opposition party CNRP, led by Sam Rainsy, were especially popular.

The popularity of smartphones and the new energy of national elections were connected. I noticed that digital media was the primary means people utilised to interact with other people and stay updated with political developments. Moreover, citizens had gained access to a myriad of new perspectives and narratives. That was possible due to more available access to the views of alternative news outlets or activist's blogs that were shared using digital media platforms. Moreover, people also used digital media to arrange political gatherings, post about them, broadcast them live, and discuss the latest public appearances of their political authorities. New technology allowed civil society to produce and publish content – not just passively receive it. Politically speaking, given the local context, people's digital awakening was crucial for the upcoming elections of 2013 because social media – Facebook in particular – had caused a turnaround in the way citizens and CSOs engaged in politics and circumvented censorship.

When I interviewed my informants about using new technology to engage in politics, some referred to digital media's role in making them more active in politics in 2013. A human rights activist said that digital media was crucial to people like him to influence the political sphere. "Activists produced audio-visual material [to post] on social media" (r3.27), and young citizens "started using social media for advocacy and politics, especially to talk about the opposition party" (ibid). The spokesperson of an opposition party political party also highlighted the importance of the internet in that electoral context. As I show later in the chapter, he introduced the concept of fear, a vital issue in this study that is strongly related to people's digital awakening. He said that social media was

> like a breakthrough, a turning point. The climate of fear has been created over the time, over the years, including in the 2013 elections, but thanks to youth and social media, so they broke the rule and climate of fear [sic], people speak up, and people are less afraid, including public servants. Again, thanks to social media and Facebook (r3.15).

However, when I did the interviews for this study in 2019, the situation regarding digital media, politics, and fear had changed, and most of my informants were afraid of politics. That contrasted with (r3.15)'s optimism when talking about 2013. Digital media did not seem to be a tool for "liberation" (Diamond, 2010, p.69) that can "expand political, social, and economic freedom" (p.70), as I had envisioned just some years earlier when I arrived in the country, and as scholarship optimistic about digital powers contends. I wondered why some of my respondents were afraid, just some years after Facebook had helped many people engaging more directly in politics. Hence, the need for an in-depth exploration of the impact of new technology in politics while considering specific contextual elements like people's fear of politics, digital media opportunities, and its challenges. Examining these factors will allow me to dive into the specific political settings of Cambodia and answer the second secondary research question, "how does civil society's digitalisation change political participation in post-authoritarian Cambodia?[20]".

This chapter examines the breakthrough of the internet in Cambodia in the 2010s. More crucially, it explains how digital media changed the state of democracy in the country. It explores how civil society embraced digital media to engage in politics and how the digital revolution was a breakthrough in the country in the first half of that decade to argue that political fear and the culture of distrust frame the opportunities and challenges that came with the rise of digital democracy. In the early stages of the digital awakening – the first half of the 2010s – the internet and social media became an asset for civil society. Its members could ease political fear and enhance their political engagement through non-

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[20] See section 1.4.

traditional forms, strengthening the relationship between civil society and the state sector. In the second half of the 2010s, the ruling party adopted a digitalisation strategy that combined a gentle approach to digital media with aggressive practices, enhancing the image of the party but also reviving fear among civil society agents. Still, people did not completely give up on the internet – as I will explain in Chapter 6, what changed was *how* people use it – highlighting that digital democracy opportunities and challenges coexist. In the case of Cambodia, the governmental crackdown responded to the earlier empowerment of civil society, something that relativised civil society's political empowerment earlier in that decade.

There are two sections in this chapter that build the argument. In the first one, I examine the wave of political optimism created in the first half of the 2010s with the arrival and popularisation of digital media. I contend that digital media helped civil society ease its political fear and, consequently, many citizens engaged more in non-traditional forms of political participation. To do this analysis, first, I show that the relationship between civil society and the state was poor due to the culture of fear forged over decades. Then, I show that digital media turned this situation around and started empowering civil society. This section also looks at the digital divide as one of the main challenges in the digital era. More specifically, I demonstrate that those citizens with sound critical thinking skills are more likely to benefit from digital media, although there are some exceptions.

The second half of the chapter concerns the digitalisation of the Government as a response to civil society's earlier digitalisation and political empowerment. I claim that the CPP co-opted digital media and revived the culture of fear among civil society, thus ensuring its political hegemony. First, I show that, after the CPP had lost a great deal of political grip in the elections of 2013, it adopted a blended approach towards social media. Its new strategy included gentle digital actions, primarily to enhance the party's image, and aggressive measures to counter the earlier political empowerment of civil society. Second, I analyse the increasing governmental pressure on political liberties that began in 2015 after the CPP embraced digital media and peaked in 2017 with the dissolution of the CNRP.

Concerning the thesis, the importance of this chapter lies in the fact that it incorporates digital media and digital democracy in the analysis of governance in Cambodia. The novelty I include is political fear in studying new technology and its intersection with politics. Introducing the digitalisation of civil society and the state sector in this chapter will allow discussing the consequences in the public sphere in Chapter 6.

5.1. A wave of political optimism

As I explained in Chapter 4, fear in Cambodia became institutionalised. Moreover, political elites have often instrumentalised fear to gain and maintain political power while silencing, politically speaking, civil society. That triggered an imbalance of political power between civil society and the state sector, challenging democratic governance because it results in a weak social fabric, inadequate mechanisms of state regulation, and fragile governance structures (Pouligny, 2005). More crucially, the imbalance of power results in a government that in part fails to deliver political goods that transform a society (Davidheiser, 1992; Messner and Fiertz, 2019; Rotberg, 2013) capable of building a thick and substantial democracy. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that while fragile states may fail to deliver *some* public goods, they may successfully conduct *other* public affairs (Goldsmith, 2007). For example, the Cambodian government has organised multi-party elections since the establishment of the PPA, thus bringing in an element of thin democracy. Still, the lack of opportunities for the consolidation of opposition parties and people's lack of opportunities to engage in non-traditional participation has deprived the country of having a thick democratic system. Consequently, Cambodia's progress towards a thin-tick approach that combines elections with full political liberties has been limited.

As Goldsmith (2007) and Rocha Menoral (2011) argue, post-conflict societies aim to ensure a state of peace and build state structures so that people's essential goods are delivered. As I explained in Chapter 4, Cambodia accomplished the first aim when the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) were established in 1991. However, it struggles with the second one. This section focuses on investigating state structures consolidation to deliver public goods in the digital era. I sustain that digital media eased people's political fear, resulting in a wave of political optimism. Consequently, civil society agents engaged in non-traditional forms of political participation that involved citizen interaction, deliberation, and expression of political views, making democracy more robust and substantive because members of the civil society felt more confident in engaging in politics beyond voting.

Securing sound state structures requires positive interaction between civil society and state sectors or, in other words, a balance of power between the two (Haider and Mcloughlin, 2016). If the state sector is too powerful, political elites can limit people's participation in public life, resulting "in a legacy of negative and weak state-society relations" (p.3). A positive relationship between civil society and the state sector is the antidote because it promotes political inclusivity and accountability (Haider and Mcloughlin, 2016). Therefore, to understand why the digitalisation of the political landscape resulted in a wave of political optimism, I must examine why there was room for improvement in the political

arena. This section has three parts. First, I sustain that, before the popularisation of digital media, the relationship between civil society and state was negative due to the culture of fear, illiberal government structures, and people's undermined political power. Second, I explore how civil society benefited from digital media to start breaking the culture of fear, create space for democratic deliberations, become more politically empowered, and, overall, generate a wave of political optimism. Third, I argue that Cambodia's digitalisation was not free of challenges. As the digital divide shows, digitalisation was an uneven process among people.

5.1.1.   The negative relationship between civil society and the state sector

This section focuses on the relationship between civil society and the state before the generalised use of new technology to engage in politics. The institutionalisation of the culture of political fear and distrust in Cambodia before the arrival of digital democracy contributed to the negative relationship between people and the Government, undermining the country's democratisation efforts since 1991. I use the four functional values found in Müller's (2006: 318-319) framework – see Figure 1 below – to analyse the link between the two spheres. The four elements are participation, legitimisation, integration, and protection. Müller's approach is helpful to investigate the relationship between civil society and state because it offers a good balance between human individuality (protection from the state and participation, in the vertical axis) and social cohesion (integration and legitimisation, in the horizontal axis). I contend that people's lack of non-traditional political involvement, partly due to the culture of fear, had a trickle-down effect resulting in a legitimacy crisis and people's poor political integration, which made them feel poorly protected against the power of the state sector.

Figure 1 - The Functional Dimension in Relations between Civil Society and the state (Müller, 2006: 320)
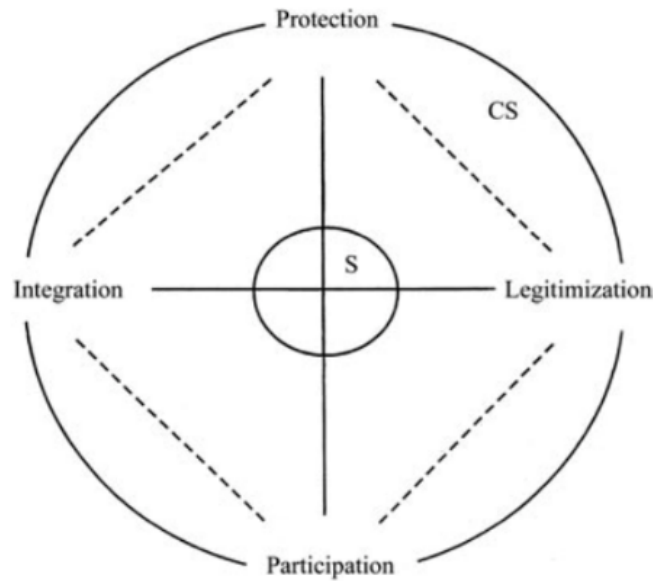
Participation

According to Müller (2006), people's lack of active political engagement is crucial to understanding civil society's poor relationship with the Government. Participation encompasses participating in elections (thin democracy) and non-traditional activities beyond choosing people's political representatives (thick democracy). When participation is low, people's role in public life is undermined. As I showed in Chapter 4, many Cambodian citizens who survived the civil war and Khmer Rouge dictatorship contracted their political engagement, especially non-traditional participation, because of the developed *baksbat*[21] (Chhim, 2012).

Moreover, some citizens (r2.06) born after the conflict era showed that survivors transmit *baksbat* to younger people. Limiting people's options to engage in public life has been a recurrent governmental strategy even in the peaceful period, mostly over Hun Sen's conviction that nobody can run the country but himself (Heder, 2011). Under the current system, people can hardly dispute CPP and Hun Sen's political dominance. For example, politically sensitive topics are barely taught at school (Dy, 2013). That limits people's opportunities to explore other forms of engagement beyond voting, limiting their opportunities for political emancipation, which could challenge the CPP's political grip.

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[21] Fear, among other translations, in Khmer language.

People's lack of non-traditional participation contrasted with their engagement in electoral democracy. Participants considered elections a fundamental mechanism of democracy and practised it widely because "there is one opportunity every five years when we vote. Once every five years, that is it" (r2.04), a citizen commented. So, the culture of fear had undermined people's non-traditional political participation primarily. Although the celebration of multiparty elections represented an unquestionable democratic advancement compared to the pre-PAA era, poor engagement in non-traditional participation sways the benefits of electoral democracy because individuals have few opportunities to assess their political preferences and change them if necessary. The system incentivised a minimalist or thin approach to democracy at the expense of more substantive and direct forms of engagement. Therefore, the Government failed to deliver participation as a public good fully. By keeping democracy procedural, the CPP concentrated a large amount of political power in the hands of its members. That is the first trait showing the poor relationship between civil society and the state sector.

Legitimisation

Legitimisation – or lack thereof – is the second factor contributing to building a negative relationship between civil society and the state sector. Lack of legitimisation translates into people's limited chances to accept or reject authority, contributing to people's perception that public opinion poorly conditions governmental policies (Müller, 2006). Legitimisation is tightly linked to political participation. Taking part in public actions is vital for assessing whether state authority deserves to be legitimate. If participation is limited to voting, legitimisation becomes an aggregative process – using the terminology I used to conceptualise democracy, legitimacy becomes thin. On the other hand, if people engage in substantive actions of non-traditional political engagement – like participation in a public forum – governance and legitimisation also become substantive or thick since they are not only subject to the celebration of elections.

When all the weight to legitimise state authority is placed on elections, legitimacy becomes thin or procedural, solely based on people's pre-existing preferences, which they express when they cast their ballots (May, 1952). Relying only on people's votes means that, to some extent, their opportunities to generate original political opinions are ignored. For example, participatory actions like deliberation are vital.

> The idea is that while democratic deliberation helps sorting through reasons for and
> against particular candidates or policy proposals, and perhaps even generates new
> alternatives, the legitimacy of the outcomes of such a process only depends on the
> fairness of the decision-making process, not on the quality of the outcomes it produces
> (Fabienne, 2017, n.p).

With the example above, Fabienne shows that non-traditional forms of political participation are vital to legitimising their government even before elections. Therefore, legitimacy can also be thick and understood as a process (Bohman, 1997; Christiano, 1997; Manin, Stein and Mansbridge, 1987). In Cambodia, the ruling party has limited thick forms of legitimisation, narrowing people's opportunities to legitimise state authority to elections. The factors that explain this situation are the country's old political culture – which has been forged over the years and instils morals like loyalty through neopatrimonialism networks – and people's experiences with political fear, making them more likely to engage only in electoral politics. Consequently, options for substantive legitimacy beyond aggregative methods like elections were rare. The spokespeople of CSOs insisted that opportunities for non-procedural legitimisation existed. Still, the ruling party restricted them. An NGO worker (r3.14) who aimed at empowering civil society at a grassroots level said that people had limited opportunities for thick legitimisation because CSO struggled to carry on their activities.

> We have one country ruled by one person for thirty years, and the limitation of rights
> for civil society to engage in the [political] process… That's a challenge, and human
> rights defenders, activists have been harassed by the Government using laws and
> regulations to interpret in the political motivates ways to shrink and limit the right of
> the citizens, CSO and human rights defenders (r3.14).

Therefore, according to (r3.14), CSOs provided opportunities to engage in public life through direct and bottom-up actions to generate thick legitimacy. Still, governmental pressure on activists and NGOs and the arbitrary use of the laws limited the effectiveness of their efforts. In illiberal regimes like Cambodia, fear often prevents people from engaging in deliberation and other forms of non-traditional engagement that can result in political views not aligned with those of the ruling party (Biddulph, 2014; Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox, 2013), undermining people's political liberties.

For instance, several informants said that disapproving the doings of the ruling party can be dangerous. Their fear was essentially political, and they were less afraid to voice their concerns about non-political, day-to-day issues. For example, (r2.18) said he expressed his views depending on the "type of problem. For example, a social problem like a broken road… I am okay to complain about it and share it. But if it is a political problem, then it is not okay" (r2.18). Informants like (r2.18) feared being targeted and

harassed by the ruling party should they complain about its policies. The spokesperson of a CSO said that people had good reasons to be afraid. "Don't worry, you will be recognised soon enough [if you complain about political issues]. You can start without interference and do it from time to time, but you will be targeted" (r3.12). So, people's fear to upset political authorities prevented them from engaging in non-traditional forms of political engagement, limiting their chances to dis(approve) the CPP's rule and contributing to thin legitimacy only. Altogether, that contributed to the negative relationship between civil society and the state.

Integration

Political integration is the third element that explains the negative relationship between civil society and state sectors. Citizens are politically integrated when their individual and collective voices are considered and become part of a more comprehensive network (Müller, 2006). So, integration reflects the degree of social-political cohesion or nationhood (Brown, 2016; Lemay-Hébert, 2009). In healthy democratic systems, the resulting community must distinguish between the political class and civil society and, more importantly, how these two interact with one another (Haider and Mcloughlin, 2016).

> Trying to build institutions without linking them to shared values and inclusive notions of citizenship and political community can result in the persistence of divisions. Perceptions of nationhood and state legitimacy are fostered through a sense of belonging and connection to the state and to wider society (p.14).

As Haider and Mcloughlin note, integration matters because it addresses social and political divisions, allowing citizens to shape public institutions. This quality is particularly relevant in weak states that might still suffer some of the consequences of their authoritarian past. Like legitimacy, integration is firmly linked to participation. People's low engagement in public life results in social fragmentation, low levels of social capital, loss of political direction and, more importantly, in individuals who feel excluded or at least not well integrated into the political system (Colletta and Cullen, 2000; Müller, 2006).

Among my informants, several everyday citizens said they used to lack political participation opportunities before the popularisation of digital democracy, highlighting the power gap between people and political elites. A primary cause for that was the culture of distrust and the perception that politicians were not genuinely interested in defending people's rights. For example, one citizen (r2.09)

who was not very emphatic towards the political class commented that "no matter which political party wins or doesn't win the elections" (r2.09), she did not get anything in return from politics. That made her feel excluded from the mechanisms that allow citizens to shape public institutions, indicating that levels of socio-political cohesion were insufficient, which made citizens feel poorly connected to the state sector. Other respondents with different social backgrounds stressed the lack of cohesion or integration between civil society and the political class. Another citizen (r2.07) said that that political parties, regardless of their colour, failed at "carry[ing] out real action" (r2.07). Weak cohesion between civil society and the state sector resulted in a poor relationship between the two, damaging Cambodia's nationhood and the democratic state-building process.

Protection

The first three elements of the link civil society-state combined – limited participation, lack of opportunities to legitimise authority, and weak integration in public life – explain people's poor engagement with governance processes. More crucially, they suggest a fourth factor to argue that the relationship between civil society and the state sector is negative: civil society's lack of protection against the state's power due to the absence of strong-armed opposition forces (Müller, 2006). As a post-conflict society, Cambodia successfully ended the violence and re-established peace thanks to the PPA. However, as I have shown, the country fell short of positive peace (Galtung, 1969; Lund, 2003) to ensure fundamental liberties. In the case of Cambodia, the culture of political fear and distrust were vital in limiting positive peace. For instance, people's fear to engage in non-traditional participation due to fear serves as an example.

A local journalist (r3.02) explained that citizens were unprotected against the Government. That limited people's liberties because "the Government was too powerful. The state was strong" (r3.02). His view mirrors the fact that, even after the PPA, the culture of peace was partially absent. The culture of peace requires the absence of conflict *and* social justice (Boulding, 2000; Parver and Wolf, 2008). Cambodia met the former but not the latter, thus remaining as a weak state. It lacked solid opposition forces to counter the ruling party's dominance so that people could dispute the CPP's political hegemony. People's lack of opportunities to create and participate in a plural system conditioned their integration in public life since they felt defenceless and not politically influential. As I noted earlier, several ordinary citizens (r2.01; r2.09) said that politically speaking, they knew the CPP would dominate the political scene in the country.

Altogether, these four elements – participation, legitimisation, integration, and protection – helped to show that, in Cambodia, the relationship between civil society and the state sector was flawed – or negative. As I have explained in the previous chapter, the culture of fear and distrust limited civil society's non-traditional political engagement remarkably, compromising the opportunities of its agents to legitimise the authority of the ruling party, along with their integration in public life. That resulted in a defenceless civil society against a disproportionally powerful state. Given the ruling party's strength, governance became a top-down process that prioritised the institutional development at the expense of the empowerment of civil society through the creation of horizontal structures to interconnect its members.

These four elements show how the climate of political fear created over the years resulted in a negative relationship between civil society and state, challenging the thin-thick approach to democracy even after establishing the PPA. Elections were celebrated regularly and legitimised the CPP's rule. Still, opportunities for non-traditional and thick political engagement were limited, partly due to people's fear, which restricted civil society's chances to legitimise the CPP's rule, preventing their integration in public life and offering little protection against the CPP's political dominance. Altogether, that resulted in a remarkable power gap between civil society and the state sector.

The question that arises is what factors and processes might improve the relationship between the two spheres. Haider and Mcloughlin's (2016) contend that building a positive interaction between state and civil society institutions allows creating a bottom-up force that empowers civil society that complements institutional politics – top-down governance. Whenever civil society and the government learn from each other and co-create governance, a positive relationship between these two spheres emerges. In weak states, such an interaction is significant because it can increase interaction (p.7) between civil society and state, thus empowering and integrating civil society actors into public life. Considering the characteristics of the Cambodia case, the next section will consider digital tools and media as a factor that contributed towards an improved relationship between civil society and the state.

5.1.2. Digital media: civil society's latest opportunity to create a positive relationship with the state

After outlining the negative relationship between civil society and the state after establishing the PPA, this section outlines how new technology interacted with the political sphere in the first half of the 2010s. It shows that digital media improved the relationship between civil society and the state, causing a wave of political optimism among members of the civil society in Cambodia. I claim that two factors triggered the wave of optimism. First, digital media eased people's political fear. As a result, citizens found a gateway into politics. More crucially, many citizens increased their engagement in actions of non-traditional political participation. Second, the ruling elites did not anticipate the emancipatory qualities of digital platforms like Facebook to empower civil society actors. Hence, the CPP's failure to adopt a digital strategy to benefit from new technology and contain people's political empowerment.

The national elections of 2013 were a critical turning point to understand the initial stages of the interaction between digital media and politics. Those elections were highly exceptional because the CPP won them with a margin of just 13 seats over the CNRP – the CPP obtained 68 seats, while the CNRP got 55 seats[22] (Al Jazeera, 2013; Hughes, 2013; Soeung, 2013). It was the first time that an opposition party challenged the CPP's political hegemony. Sam Rainsy, the leader of the CNRP at that time, said that was a historic day for his party (Al Jazeera, 2013).

Besides the CNRP outstanding electoral results, my interviews with everyday citizens and the spokespeople of some CSOs revealed that another impact of digital media in politics was that many people started evaluating their understanding of Cambodia's political system more carefully. Citizens assessed their role in governance and how they could participate in politics beyond voting. This finding is critical to the thin-thick approach to democracy because many respondents reflected upon their non-traditional forms of political engagement – a type of participation that was not widely practised until the arrival of new technology. Most informants did not even mention the electoral success of the CNRP during our conversations. Instead, they focused on how their day-to-day political engagement and role in public life had changed with the arrival of digital media. For example, the CNRP mass political rallies in the context of the 2013 elections displayed public support for an opposition party (Un, 2015) – a rare activity since the coup of 1997[23] – showing that people were more open and willing

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[22] In 2013, the National Assembly had 123 seats in total. Today, in 2020, it has 125 seats.

[23] See section 4.2.1

to show their political preferences through non-traditional forms of political engagement than before (r3.22; r3.23). The political landscape became more plural, and the CNRP became the first party to threaten the CPP's political hegemony since 1997. The relative pluralisation of the political scene combined with more politically active citizens was a step forward to open the public sphere and make democracy thicker or more substantive, complementing procedural, thin democracy. Overall, several NGO workers (r3.22; r3.23) stressed that democratic rule was strengthened and human rights improved.

The burst of the internet and social media into the political scene is crucial to explain people's increased engagement in non-traditional political participation and the exceptional results of the CNRP in the 2013 elections. The internet, smartphones, and social media platforms like Facebook became trendy among many voters very rapidly. In 2012, just one year before the elections, the number of internet users had increased by a 548% (We Are Social, 2012). Experts quickly highlighted the importance of SNS in growing people's political participation, especially in actions beyond casting a ballot (Asia Foundation, 2016; Vong and Hok, 2018). However, the correlation between digital media, political participation, and specific contextual elements like political fear in the 2010s in Cambodia is underexplored.

Below, I show that many citizens increased their non-traditional political engagement because they could ease their political fear thanks to new technology. That was possible due to the role of younger citizens who created a horizontal and bottom-up force that empowered civil society. Another contributing factor was the failure of the CPP to foresee the political importance of digital democracy and its lack of digital strategy.

Youth, digital media, and the building of a firewall against fear

In the early 2010s, the penetration index of the internet and SNS such as Facebook increased exponentially. For example, in 2012, 16% of people in Cambodia had access to the internet (We Are Social, 2012). More crucially, the number of internet users in 2012 increased by 548% (ibid). In the first half of that year, the number of Facebook users – the country's most popular social media platform – increased 41% (ibid). Given the popularity of the internet and social media, the interaction of technology and politics because relevant rapidly, reshaping democracy in the country.

A meaningful way civil society benefited from new technology was its enhanced capacity to share political views. That opportunity was especially relevant to those whose voices were unheard; they

suddenly found a way to increase their political engagement. The spokesperson of an NGO (r3.11) reflected on the significance of internet-based tools.

> Here [in Cambodia], without digital platforms, people have a history of [political] silence. They do not have a group of people who listens to their issues, but social media was a space for them to speak out (r3.11).

The term "political silence" (r3.11) is vital. In the earlier sections of this chapter – and Chapter 4 – I have addressed political silence and linked it to people's lack of *non-traditional* political participation – since voter turnout has remained high since 1993. The term "speak out" (r3.11) meant two things. First, it had a literal sense since new technology allowed citizens to verbalise their political views. Second, speaking out had a figurative sense because many people used the internet to project their political views or participate in other political actions in the analogue world. For example, some took part in political rallies like those of the CNRP mentioned earlier, arranged mainly through Facebook (r3.22; r3.23).

The CNRP was aware of the increasing importance of social media and made the most out of it. Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha – the two founding members of the CNRP – dramatically increased their online activity before the elections of 2013 and set up a network of activists who posted about the elections and created satellite Facebook pages. That way, the CNRP reached more people, especially at a local level, and gathered tens of thousands of citizens who attended their meetings (Asia Foundation, 2016; Meyn, 2013). Those actions were crucial to improve the state of democracy in the country because non-traditional and multitudinous displays of thick democracy like those rallies were unusual in the country – many citizens still remembered the 1997 coup against those who took part in political gatherings.

The cases of two citizens (r2.07; r2.08) are helpful to explain the mainstream view among informants about digital media changing their engagement in politics. First, (r2.07) is an adult with higher education. He had always been interested in politics but was hesitant to express his political preferences due to fear of being harassed. That changed with the popularisation of SNS. Thanks to his smartphone and laptop, he could easily access news outlets to receive political inputs and stay up to date with future events arranged using social media. As a result, he was better informed and, more crucially, became more confident to participate in the events organised by the CNRP, thus engaging in non-traditional politics and thickening democracy.

The second example is (r2.08), a young informant with a university degree. She also edged that Facebook helped her make up her mind and participate in political meetings, especially those to support the CNRP. Still, she also said that, out of curiosity, she attended some CPP gatherings. These two examples reveal that digital media helped those two people increase their non-traditional participation and, in (r2.08)'s case, become more politically active regardless of her political preferences since she attended events organised by both major parties. The latter example shows the vital role of new technology in promoting thick democracy; (r2.08) did not change her political stand because of social media, but she was able to contrast views.

Informants representing CSOs also benefited from digital tools to improve their political participation, mainly to gain visibility among ordinary citizens and build bridges with people. The primary opportunity was that digital media allowed organisations and activists to do online advocacy. More importantly, informants like human rights activists (r3.27) said that digital media helped him avoiding governmental censorship (r3.27) – in section 6.1.3, I present his case in greater detail. Sometimes, communication between members of CSOs and people was one-way – when they broadcasted their content, and the relationship with the audience was not interactive. On other occasions, communication was two-way; CSO representatives could interact with their audience. For example, two NGO workers (r3.04; r3.05) mainly working with rural citizens explained that digital media improved communication with rural villagers.

> Some people start reading what we post [on social media] for the first time. They read our headlines. First, they "like" and "share" our page and, if they are experiencing any problem, sometimes they comment on our posts, and some of them send us a message (r3.04).

The views of these NGO workers suggested that digital media allowed them to reach out to more people and build rapport with citizens since new technology widened people's political horizons with a plurality of political opinions and options[24]. More crucially, using digital media to reach out to more everyday citizens meant that CSOs could start fixing people's limited access to opposition forces, caused by the lack of independent press or people's fear of getting involved with groups of people

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[24] Digital media allowed access to a plurality of forces with political connotations, but not necessarily direct opposition forces to the ruling party.

with different views of the ruling party. Before the arrival of new technology, several attacks against Hun Sen's regime opponents fuelled people's political fear and lack of will to engage in them.

> In October 2003, the deputy editor of a pro-FUNICNPEC radio station which had recently been publicly criticized by Hun Sen and a popular singer affiliated with FUNCINPEC [25] [National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia] were killed. Five more political activists were murdered in January 2004, including prominent trade union leader Chea Vichea, who was closely associated with the SRP [Sam Rainsy Party] (Adams, 2015, n.p).

People's limited access to opposition forces due to fear is crucial in the analysis of digital democracy because Alves (1990) identifies it as the first of the three elements of the culture of political fear – the other two are political isolation and self-censorship. Digital media was crucial to start breaking political fear. As I will argue in section 5.1.3, the digitalisation of politics was uneven among people. Several social markers like education and critical thinking skills made digitalisation an inconsistent process among citizens. Still, in this part, I introduce age – especially the role of young people – as a crucial factor that facilitated the growth of digital democracy. The median age in Cambodia is just under 26, and those below 35 are the majority (CIA, 2020; We Are Social, 2020) – see Figure 2 below. Therefore, quantitatively speaking, youth is the largest population cohort.

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[25] Cambodia's royalist party.

Figure 2 - Cambodia population pyramid (CIA, 2020)
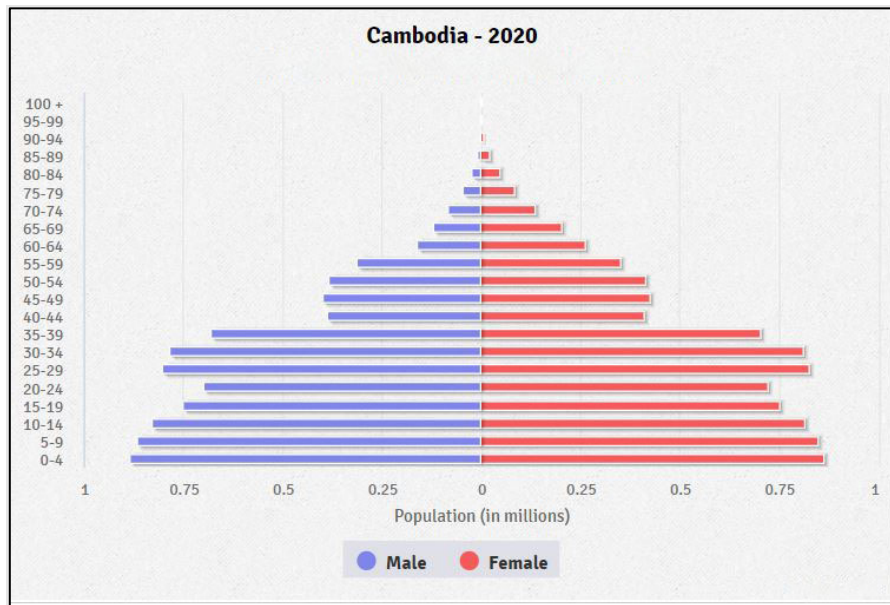
The analysis of my data revealed that a critical difference between junior and senior informants was that junior respondents were less afraid to engage in politics (r1.05; r2.17; r3.05; r3.14; r3.26), although not unafraid. The representatives of some CSOs shared that observation too and highlighted that younger people tended to be generally less fearful than adults. An essential reason is that young citizens were born after the civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime (r3.14; r3.26). Unlike many adults, young people do not have direct memories of the atrocities committed in the 1970s and 1980s. This makes youth less likely to experience *baksbat*, unless adults transmit it to them[26], as I explained in Chapter 4.

The spokespeople of some CSOs (r3.10; r3.15) also noted that the better digital skills of young generations – compared to more senior citizens – to use their smartphones more efficiently (Vong and Hok, 2018) was a critical element to explain the popularisation of digital democracy to start overcoming political fear. For example, a 54-year-old participant (r2.10) had the Facebook application downloaded on her Samsung device. Still, she lacked the skills to benefit from most of the platform's functions. She could log in and scroll down on the newsfeed, but she could not use it for a specific purpose. It is essential to note that adults' relatively low digital literacy rates reflect a literacy problem in its broadest sense. In 2015, the literacy rate among Cambodian adults was 80.53% (UNESCO, 2016), making it difficult for some people to use their smartphones efficiently.

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[26] Some disorders caused by trauma can be transmitted from generation to generation. This is called transgenerational trauma (Fromm (Ed), 2012).

The fact that youth was generally less afraid to participate in politics and had better digital literacy positively impacted the creation of citizen networks (r3.15). In other words, digital media helped people creating a sound web of contacts by improving the interaction among citizens and also between citizens and CSOs. A board member of an opposition political party explained that SNS had been vital for its founding members to conceptualise their political project. Thanks to Facebook, they could carry on a consultation process among several key informants. They used Facebook because it was a free tool to approach multiple and diverse local communities like farmers, public servants, or the youth sector. As a result, they were able to establish the ideological foundations of the party in collaboration with civil society. However, the age split and different levels of digital literacy became an obstacle. "The middle-aged do not have much access to a smartphone or cannot use it, so they lack information about us. They do not know us" (r3.15) – in section 5.1.3, I explain why the digital divide is a challenge to make democracy more substantive.

(r3.15)'s observations suggested that digital media improved political communication among members of civil society – especially between CSOs and ordinary citizens – because organisations with limited resources like (r3.15)'s could reach out to more people. Moreover, politically isolated people found a way to engage with fellow citizens and CSOs. A political analyst (r1.05) described the importance of networks to feel less isolated and become politically active.

> The political implication of using digital tools in politics is that people get information, they understand it, they feel the need to change things or choose the right leader, report issues to NGOs, take collective action, join campaigns and establish links and connections among groups of people (r1.05).

As (r1.05) indicated, people's increased use of digital media created civic networks that pushed people out of their political comfort zones, thus reducing their political isolation. That was critical in easing political fear because, according to Alves (1990), the second characteristic of the culture of fear is people's political isolation. As I have shown, new technology proved to be an effective mechanism to reduce political isolation among some respondents, lowering political fear.

So far, in this section, I have shown that new technology facilitated access to opposition forces and builds citizen networks that reduce people's political isolation. These two characteristics of digital media are a stepping-stone to decreasing people's political self-censorship – the third element of the culture of fear (Alves, 1990). The role of CSOs was vital in reducing people's self-censorship. Thanks to digital media, independent news outlets like Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia (RFA), or Voice of Democracy (VOD) reached larger audiences and presented their views to the public. That was also

the case of activists or independent analysis, who could freely express their opinions via means that the Government did not control – such as Facebook. As a local journalist (r3.02) indicated, the internet became a communication channel free from the governmental filter. While digital media did not replace traditional mass media like TV or radio stations, they coexisted. Independent media outlets, activists, or organisations were attracted to the myriad of opportunities the internet offers: free essential services, the possibility to broadcast their content to the masses quickly, and, more crucially, that platforms like Facebook became popular among Cambodian citizens rapidly. Overall, they could effortlessly reach the masses (r3.02; r3.12).

Those opportunities translated into people expressing their political views more openly, thus reducing self-censorship. Some informants (r2.1; r2.16; r2.19;) said they engaged in online political discussions more due to setting up their social media accounts and gaining access to various perspectives and opinions. Moreover, the benefits of digital media were also noted in the offline sphere. For example, a citizen (r3.01) who was a member of an opposition party recalled how Facebook prompted offline political actions like attendance to political rallies and how he could overhear in-person political discussions in some cafés across Phnom Penh at the time. It was a stark change, as previously such discussions were rarely present in public spaces due to the citizens' fears of the government's repressions. Digital media offered the possibility to receive political inputs at any time and moment, which triggered non-traditional forms of political engagement in the online and offline space. The political sphere widened, and people's self-censorship decreased.

As I have shown, new technology facilitated access to opposition forces, reduced their political isolation, and self-censorship on political issues – especially among young people – creating a wave of political optimism among members of the civil society in the first half of the 2010s. To the state of democracy, that wave of optimism was crucial because "[the culture of fear] was broken, people spoke up and were less afraid, including public servants" (r3.15) – see Table 3 below. As a result, non-traditional forms of political engagement increased among people and CSO, who gained new ways of expressing their political stands. Reducing fear and increasing non-traditional participation shows that new technology reinforced a thin-thick approach to democracy. Many citizens were confident enough to engage in actions of thick democracy like protests or speaking in political forums, while voter turnout rates remained high.

Even if I have outlined people's use of new technology to ease political fear and make democracy more substantive, it was not the only contributing factor. In the next section, I argue that the CPP's lack of anticipation to face the impact of digital democracy and unpreparedness to embrace digital media contributed to the people's political empowerment.

Table 4 - How civil society eased the culture of politics in the early 2010s

Elements in the culture of fear		How civil society in Cambodia countered fear
Closed channels to opposing forces	⇔	Digital tools gave civil society access to opposition forces, thus bridging people and politics
Sense of isolation	⇔	Civil society interacts with opposition forces
Censorship	⇔	Civil society voices its political views
Outcome: fearful civil society		*Outcome: less political fear*

The CPP's digital unpreparedness

The CPP approach to digital media was another critical factor in creating a wave of political optimism that resulted in increased non-traditional political participation in the early 2010s. The CPP failed to anticipate digital media's political implications, failing to establish a digital strategy that, along with enhancing its image, could contain people's political empowerment. Consequently, the ruling party CPP did not benefit from social media platforms such as Facebook when civil society made the most out of them.

The CPP's primary miscalculation was its failure to predict the youth's voting preferences (Hughes, 2013), especially those born after the harshest years of conflict in the 1970s and 1980s, many of which were alienated from the patrimonialism networks that I described in Chapter 4. Some explanations are youth's better education or many young people moving out to large cities like Phnom Penh to work or study, where the CPP influence is weaker. That was meaningful because "it suggests that these sophisticated and well-practiced techniques of social control are not working as well as previously in rendering the electorate legible to the party" (p.10). Therefore, authorities had a clear picture of the voting preferences of older generations who went through the years of conflict before 1991, but not of younger people.

That lack of preparedness to confront those social developments was evident because the CPP had been ignoring the democratising capabilities of SNS in the hands of the youth, who used Facebook to protest social inequalities, cases of corruption, and injustices that Cambodia's crony capitalism had

created (Un, 2015). Moreover, Hun Sen paid little attention to Facebook's role in politics when his primary political opponent, CNRP's Sam Rainsy, took social media very seriously (r1.06).

> Social media played a key role. I remember 2012, just a year before the collections, Prime Minister Hun Sen said that he doesn't have time for Facebook, and even called Sam Rainsy the Facebook Prime Minister. At that time, the opposition became well informed, very popular, and invested a lot in social media (r1.06).

The CPP's lack of digital strategy put the party at a disadvantage because it could not benefit from digital media since its members simply ignored platforms like Facebook. More crucially, that happened in parallel to CNRP's solid strategy on the net to create a united and strong opposition force, capable of running an effective digital campaign to address people's urgent concerns, and capable of running an effective digital campaign (Un, 2015). People's energy and the force of a united political opposition, aided by digital media, were especially noticeable in cities like Phnom Penh. However, the new digital political opportunities also arrived in the countryside – the stronghold of the CPP – and facilitated the interaction between citizens and CSOs (ibid) since young migrant workers transmitted liberal ideas from urban hubs to their families living in rural villages (Hughes and Eng, 2018; Un, 2015). That way, urban and rural citizens with limited digital literacy or access to the net also benefitted from digital media, which often translated into offline action (Vong and Hok, 2018).

To sum up, the arrival and popularisation of digital tools and media altered democracy in the early 2010s. New technology helped create a wave of political optimism, and many citizens – especially youth – started breaking the culture of political fear forged over the years. Thanks to the internet, civil society gained more straightforward access to more information sources and improved its organisation skills, allowing them to easily access non-governmental narratives, build or strengthen networks, and reduce self-censorship. All these factors contributed to increasing people's non-traditional political engagement, which complemented electoral democracy. People being more engaged through non-traditional forms of participation was highly important. Increased participation translated into new opportunities for citizens to legitimise the rule of the CPP beyond elections. Non-traditional engagement opened the doors to hosting political discussions, forums and online talks that shaped people's political mindsets. People's direct political engagement also contributed to increasing their integration in public life. Altogether, many citizens were politically empowered and less vulnerable to the political power of the ruling party. These participatory and deliberative actions were crucial to thicken democracy and make it substantive, complementing electoral democracy and

moving closer to the thin-tick model of democratic governance. Still, civil society's digitalisation was not free of challenges. Below, I focus on the digital divide.

5.1.3. The digital divide

The elections of 2013 showed some of the opportunities offered by digital democracy, such as more accessible access to information and better organisational skills and how civil society benefited from digital media. Nonetheless, all those prospects for Cambodia's democratisation were not free of challenges. One of them was the digital divide. It concerns digital inequalities of infrastructure like access to smartphones or the internet (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001), a gap in people's digital skills (Hargittai, 2010; van Dijk, 2006; Weaver Lariscy, Tinkham and Sweetser, 2011), people's geographical origin, known as urban-rural split (Chinn and Fairlie, 2006), or age (Mossberger, Tolbert and Stansbury, 2003). Incorporating the digital divide in the analysis of digital democracy matters because its variables offer a more detailed view of the population's digitalisation process.

Moreover, the interdependence between variables is equally essential because the "causes of the digital divide are part of a more complicated assembly of societal processes" (Wijers, 2010: 337). So, the digital divide is a blanket term that describes how multiple variables interact with one another. In the previous section, I addressed the age gap and how youth became more engaged in non-traditional participation with the arrival of digital media. In this part, I focus on the other key variable that respondents indicated: digital literacy.

The importance of education in political participation has broadly been researched (Verba and Nie, 1987; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1990). According to Putnam (2000), it "is one of the most important predictors – usually, in fact, the most important predictor – of many forms of social participation – from voting to associational membership, to chairing a local committee to hosting a dinner party to giving blood" (p.186).

The arrival of digital democracy revived the debate on the influence of education in politics. Some claim that digital media enhances civic engagement and promotes electoral participation (Cohen and Kahne, 2012; Jenkins, 2009). Then, in the digital era, a crucial discussion is how digital literacy influences political participation. Digital literacy is the "minimal set of skills that will enable the user to operate effectively with software tools, or in performing basic information retrieval" (Buckingham, 2010, p.360). It provides users with the necessary skills to reason and evaluate how to use digital tools and media (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2011). These views underline two critical ideas in the

evaluation of digital literacy. First, users must be able to use digital appliances. Second, they must use them with a specific and reasoned purpose. Earlier, I have explained that (r2.10) had the Facebook application on her smartphone, but she did not have the minimum skills to use this platform to meet any specific purpose. She was a passive user that could only scroll down the screen. So, her digital literacy was not inexistent because she could use her smartphone, but she could not use it critically.

Citizens and the spokespeople of CSOs acknowledged that education is a fundamental right. Still, they also believed that people's digital and political literacy were insufficient, and they would like to receive better education of both types. Informants indicated a significant gap between those with a secondary school diploma and those without it. A majority of informants correlated higher formal education with higher digital and political literacy. For example, a young respondent with a university degree said that

> I think the first and most important thing is education. The more we understand, social media will have more advantages [sic], but for the less educated… I don't think it's much of a gift for them. They waste their time (r2.08).

Statistics on school and university attainment mirror claims like those of (r2.08). Primary school net enrolment in 2017 was 90%, a number that falls drastically to 38.75% when looking at the upper secondary school enrolment rate (in 2014) and is even lower for tertiary education at 13.13% (in 2017) (UNESCO, 2020). A political analyst (r1.05) indicated that the education gap is a challenge for political participation because education determines how citizens stay updated on the latest political developments and interact with the digital inputs they receive. For example, they will read only the news headlines if they have little knowledge of politics or have limited digital skills. So, they are less likely to read the full article and critically engage with it. During some interviews, I witnessed some of the implications of the education gap. For example, one respondent asked the research assistant to read the consent form aloud because he was "too lazy to read" (r2.12). Another respondent (r2.10) asked me to synthesize and explain the consent form to her, not needing to read it. None of these two respondents had completed primary education. (r2.12) left school after completing grade 3, and (r2.10) after grade 2.

The spokespeople of some CSO emphasised that critical thinking skills are essential to define people's engagement in public life (r3.28), underlining that the digital divide is primarily determined by people's capacity to use digital tools and media critically. That view is similar to Buckingham's (2003) and Hobbs' (2011), who argue that critical thinking determines whether users use reason and evaluate their use of internet-based tools. So, critical thinking determines who is more reflective about the information

users consume. In the digital era, critical thinking matters because platforms like Facebook provide vaguely filtered content (r3.28). Information can easily be manipulated, or it can just be wrong (ibid). Hence, the challenge of dealing with misinformation and disinformation.

Interviews with everyday citizens provided enough evidence to suggest that critical thinking is a far-reaching element in analysing political participation. Those with the highest levels of formal education – especially those with a secondary school diploma or higher – used digital media more critically, regardless of their age. They showed their critical engagement through their scepticism towards online data until they could validate it, questioned what they read, and considered the sources and whether the data was politically biased. More importantly, those who showed better critical thinking skills were more politically active. For example, a young female with a university degree (r2.08) said that digital media helped her attend political rallies of the CPP and the CNRP. That enabled her to define her political preferences.

The case of one ordinary citizen (r2.16) stood out among the rest. She was in her mid-thirties and had not completed secondary school. Still, she worked for an NGO, where she said she had developed strong critical thinking skills. That was why she could learn how to use digital media more effectively with a specific purpose and become highly engaged in non-traditional politics – she was also one of the most politically engaged and outspoken respondents and showed zero political fear.

So, education has traditionally been the cause of a sharp social divide between those with a secondary school diploma and those with lower qualifications. Still, interviews revealed that the differences between citizens who have good critical thinking skills and those who do not create sharper contrasts – more than age and the formal level of education, as some informants showed that adults and citizens without a secondary school diploma who have been able to develop strong critical thinking skills have been able to use digital media to improve their non-traditional participation and public life. Overall, then, the digital divide is highly relevant to understand political participation in the digital era. It shows that digital media can improve political participation, but not all sectors of the population are likely to benefit from the internet equally; those with strong critical thinking skills – regardless of other variables like age – can also make the most out of digital media. Hence, the relevance of critical thinking over other variables.

This section has shown that the popularisation of digital media resulted in a wave of political optimism in the first half of the 2010s. The political fear and distrust created in earlier decades resulted in a negative relationship between civil society and the Government. That was defined by people's lack of non-traditional participation, which had left civil society poorly protected against the political

dominance of the CPP. Put differently, there was a remarkable power imbalance between people and the state. Digital media played a vital role in addressing that gap. Since its arrival, civil society embraced digital media to break the culture of fear; its members gained access to alternative, non-pro-government narratives, created networks, and spoke out their political voices and, overall, increased their non-traditional participation. That challenged the dominance of the CPP, which did not have a clear digital strategy. Still, challenges like the digital divide emerged. Critical thinking emerged as a vital element of the digital divide. Informants who had benefited the most from digital media were those with stronger critical thinking skills, a quality was predominantly found among younger respondents with higher levels of formal education, but some cases indicated that as long as a citizen can think critically, age and education become less relevant.

It is also worth indicating that the urban-rural divide is vital in understanding the digital divide due to the differences between non-urban hubs and large cities like Phnom Penh regarding digital infrastructure and access to the internet. As I explained in Chapter 3, this investigation considers informants from the capital city. Although most of them were born in the countryside and made references to their home provinces, the body of primary data was relatively thin to make substantial claims regarding the geographical divide, which future research can address.

5.2. The digitalisation of the Government

So far, this chapter has shown civil society's empowerment through digital media and how the internet improved the relationship between civil society and the state sector – regardless of challenges like the digital divide. This section focuses on the governmental reaction to the earlier empowerment of civil society with digital media. It argues that the CPP's embracement of digital media resulted in a political crackdown that made Cambodia enter a period of digital authoritarianism. This section is split into two parts. In the first one, I outline how the ruling party embraced digital technology to respond to civil society's earlier political empowerment. Its strategy consisted of a gentle use of digital media combined with aggressive practices to co-opt the digital sphere. In the second part, I argue that increased pressure on people's political liberties resulted in a political crackdown that affected ordinary people and CSO alike.

5.2.1. The ruling party's blended approach to digital media

Irrespective of civil society's political empowerment, the CPP remained politically, economically, and socially hegemonic (Global Witness, 2016). Moreover, after the elections of 2013, the ruling party had learnt that ignoring digital media was no longer a valid strategy and initiated its digitalisation process. This section examines the CPP's embracement of digital media to remain politically dominant and counter the earlier empowerment of civil society. It shows that the ruling successfully used digital media to improve its members' image and tighten people's political rights, which resulted in a political crackdown that countered the democratic expansion in the early 2010s.

The digitalisation of the ruling party began after the elections of 2013, raising concerns among experts over people's compromised political liberties in line with those in other similar contexts like China (Jiang, 2020) and India (Arun, 2017). A political analyst (r1.06) said that when the CPP embraced digital media, experts were concerned about *how* the ruling party would use it. He (r1.06) noted that digital media made Hun Sen a more approachable leader to the masses. Still, he also said that the CPP's sudden embracement of new technology was worrying.

> I haven't seen him [Hun Sen] changing his approach very often. But in the case of social media, he adopted a new one very quickly, and he even told the members of his party to start using social media a lot, like Telegram, to communicate [with others] (r1.06).

The quote above implies that Hun Sen's sudden embracement of SNS anticipated a drastic social and political change in Cambodia, likely resulting in a wave of illiberalism threatening the democratic progress made in the first half of the 2010s. The spokespeople of some CSOs referred to the political turn that (r1.06) observed as well. The representative of a think tank (r3.03) said there is a thin line between using digital media for legitimate political purposes and co-opting it, diverting its "original" use to obtain specific benefits. For example, the fair use of the internet allowed the CPP to use digital media to promote the party. At the same time, the latter meant that the ruling party could monitor people's digital interactions – like Facebook posts – to approach users physically, coerce them, and "tell them what to do" (r3.03) – politically. In other words, Cambodia was not immune to digital surveillance (McCoy, 2009; Qiang, 2019), which ensured the CPP's tight social and political control. Other researchers like Beban, Schoenberger and Lamb (2020) have also noted that digital surveillance has become an obstacle.

> We realised the extent of online surveillance and its implication for imaginaries of authoritarianism and how this shapes everyday practices when one of us noticed that a rural activist friend was no longer on Facebook. She later explained that she and other land activists in her community had all deleted their Facebook accounts because they had been threatened with arrest for content they posted (p.109).

The example above shows that social media can be used with healthy democratic ends like promoting the principles of a party. Still, it can also respond to illiberal aims like coercing the electorate to influence their vote. In (r3.03)'s view, the ruling party aimed at adopting both approaches. The think tank worker said that "[Government officials] feel they must be better than the opponent on social media to be able to mobilise more people and, on the other side, they want to control and crackdown" (r3.03).

The views of these two informants – (r1.06) and (r3.03) – distinguish between *using* digital media and *co-opting* it. Still, those are not mutually exclusive. The Government adopted a blended approach to social media that combined gentle and aggressive practices. Gentle practices allowed Hun Sen to use Facebook to project the most charming version of himself – something he excels at. He broadcasted his day-to-day life via Facebook, such as his personal and professional commitments, becoming even more active than his CNRP political opponents – who had been using Facebook for a long time. Hun Sen created "an image of intimacy with local people by sharing his visits to rural houses or posting personal family photos on his Facebook page" (Soeung, 2016, p.120). As of September 2021, his Facebook page[27] had reached over thirteen million *likes*. He also repeatedly proclaimed himself the "king of Facebook", as a human rights activist (r3.27) recalled.

However, Hun Sen's meteoric digital success has occasionally been controversial. Sam Rainsy accused him of using click farms to promote his digital popularity and manipulate public opinion to gain political power (Wallace, 2018). Accusations aside, his rapid digital success demonstrates that the CPP took digital media seriously and successfully used Facebook to reconnect with its supporters. Moreover, an INGO worker (r3.26) explained that the CPP also benefited from social media to distract people from politically controversial topics.

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[27] https://www.facebook.com/hunsencambodia

> Let them [people] talk about celebrities, funny things, trolls... but not about politics.
> They [Government officials] allow certain types of information to emerge, but they
> also try to limit the flow of facts about politics and society, taxation, national budgets...
> things that would hamper their control over the population [...]. If a stupid celebrity
> does something, they get lots of "likes", and the authorities know it. If you create
> [cyber]troops that keep trolling this, then you polarise the environment and nobody
> will talk about politics, education or about the society anymore... they just talk about
> funny things (r3.26).

Using digital media to distract people from politics is an old strategy used with mass media before the media sector was digitalised (Kern and Hainmueller, 2009; Louw, 2005). However, in the digital era, information circulates and becomes viral very rapidly without necessarily being properly contrasted, raising concerns over its veracity. That gives an account of the coexistence of digital media opportunities and challenges. Governments and people enjoy easy access to information, but smartphones have become tools that quickly alter political perceptions.

In the paragraphs above, I indicated that Hun Sen and the CPP could use Facebook to strengthen their political image. Still, the ruling party's digital approach to digital media also consisted of aggressive measures. The spokespeople of several CSOs (r3.18; r3.19; r3.26) expressed their concerns about the existence of cyber troops and cyberwar rooms (CWR). Cyber troops are government agents that use online means to manipulate public opinion through disinformation campaigns (Howard and Bradshaw, 2018), while cyberwar rooms (CWR) are

> departments run by the Government to monitor social media platforms, [...] and
> troops placed in different locations that constantly monitor how citizens' online
> engagement, especially those who belong to opposition parties or civil society groups
> (r3.26).

The aim of a CWR goes beyond enhancing the image of a politician. Digital media is also used to monitor citizens, CSOs, and spread propaganda (Human Rights Watch, 2020a; Mou, 2020). For example, in the first quarter of 2020, the Government of Cambodia was accused of using the Covid-19 pandemic to tighten surveillance and monitor the SNS accounts of overcritical voices of the CPP, resulting in several arrests – thus in the curtailed people's political rights – to avoid negative comments that could damage the image of the party (Human Rights Watch, 2020a; Mou, 2020). The CPP's aggressive approach to digital media also targeted CSOs. The spokesperson of an INGO (r3.26) said that the organisation he represented had suffered attacks from cyber troops multiple times to undermine the reputation of his institution.

> We know who run these pages. I recall [reading] some articles talking about [*name of institution*] that were published on a page that belongs to the ruling party. That was to degrade our reputation. The purpose is to attach [*name of institution*] as an institution (r3.26).

Moreover, (r3.26) went a step further and claimed that the Government has been receiving technological support from China, Cambodia's most significant economic and political ally.

> The ruling party did not learn this by itself. They have aid from agencies that benefit from the regime […]. We got information that China supplies digital security and monitoring capabilities to the ruling party, at the Ministry of Interior and at the Council… Huawei… they do not only supply technical material, but also capacity, so the troops are able to monitor social media. China plays a big role: as a state, they are doing more than just helping… they probably provide intelligence that would benefit the ruling party to go after the opposition and probably go after the civil society activists. So, China plays a very big role (r3.26).

According to Bradshaw and Howard's report (2019), computational propaganda in Cambodia is carried out by governmental agencies and politicians, emphasising the former. The representatives of other CSOs (r3.12; r3.18; r3.19; r3.22; r3.23) also suspected that the Government has been receiving overseas technological support to developing their system of "computational propaganda" (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019, p.i) and be able to "use of algorithms, automation, and big data to shape public life" (p.1).

The outputs of existing reports and the views of my informants should be contrasted with governmental sources. However, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, this study does not include informants representing the state sector. While the Sino-Cambodian relationship is beyond the scope of this study, it is essential to note that the relationship between the two countries is not limited to the technological field. Cambodia has maintained a historically good relationship with China, obtaining favourable trade deals and backing from one of the strongest economies and armies in the world. In exchange, China can increase its presence in Southeast Asia, a critical region in expanding its regional and global influence. That being said, the Sino-Cambodia relationship and its impact on the CPP's digitalisation is a new line of future research.

The state sector's new aggressive measures increased the CPP dominance online in two ways. First, the party used cyber laws to increase its political dominance, limiting people's digital activity and, more generally, their political freedoms. In February 2021, "an 11-page decree announced on Wednesday requires internet service providers to reroute their services through a National Internet

Gateway within the next 12 months, before February 2022" (Prak, 2021, n.p), a "China-style internet gateway that would allow all online traffic to be controlled and monitored, saying it would be a new tool for longtime leader Hun Sen to repress any opposition" (ibid). Cyber laws were controversial among watchdogs and international organisations since they were drafted.

> The draft states that its purpose is "to ensure probity in use and the management of computer systems and computer data and to protect security and public order." Article 45 calls for up to three years in prison for intentional false statements that have an "adverse effect" on national security; public health, public safety, or public finances; relations with other countries; the results of a national election; that incite racial hostility, hatred or discrimination; or cause a loss of public confidence in the government or state institutions. Article 40 prohibits acts that vaguely constitute "disturbing, frightening, threatening, violating, persecuting or verbally abusing others by means of computer" (Human Rights Watch, 2020, n.p).

Still, as Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch, indicated (ibid), the draft did not define the meaning of key terms and ideas like what adverse effect meant or which authority would evaluate whether terms have been violated, giving the Government the power to prosecute political opponents arbitrarily. However, one respondent (r3.26) pointed out that cyber laws must be used with caution because if citizens perceive those regulations are too restrictive, "they get angry".

Cyber laws are tightly linked to fear, the second governmental aggressive way to increase its online dominance. (r3.26) added that inducing fear can be more effective than passing harsh and restrictive cyber laws. With its technological skills, the Government has been able to manipulate online content and identify those how had been overcritical of the ruling party (Freedom House, 2021b). The aim was to harass critics to create a chilling effect (r3.26) to make people and organisations fear online surveillance and the prosecution of online speech (Freedom House, 2021b), increasing civil society's self-censorship (Ly, 2019). When the Government uses fear, people understand that using the net to criticise the ruling party is not safe and "people stop talking about it [political issues] (r3.26). Therefore, cyber laws are effective because they are a repressive measure more than a punitive one. As the spokesperson of an NGO (r3.12) explained, fear in the online sphere is a problem because "SNS activists have been accused by the Government because of their [online] expression. Right now, they cannot make their criticism because of accusations using criminal laws against them" (r3.12). The ruling party's aggressive approach to digital media negatively impacted people's freedoms. In 2021, Cambodia scored 25/100 (5/40 in political rights and 20/60 in civil liberties) and 43/100 in people's freedom on the net (ibid).

The CPP's dual approach to social media confirms that the line dividing social media's fair use and its co-option is blurred, as some informants (r1.06; r3.03) noted. The internet allowed the ruling party to emphasise with part of the electorate by giving some people the impression that their voices could be heard and would make a difference in the political arena. However, in parallel, the CPP also co-opted the digital sphere as part of the digitalisation strategy of the ruling party and could silence some dissenting voices, scaring citizens and limiting their online activities, as well as their offline political engagement. That matters because it shows that online pressure had consequences to the offline sphere. Hence, the importance of considering online and offline actions as complementary.

Autocrats using the internet to limit people's political liberties while giving them a sense of certain freedom through flawed democratic means like elections is a practice that allows despotic leaders to manipulate public opinion while keeping a democratic façade. It is known as "digital authoritarianism" (Polyakova and Meserole, 2019, p.2), "networked authoritarianism" (MacKinnon, 2012, p.33), or "informational autocracy" (Guriev and Treisman, 2020, p.1). The digitalisation of the ruling party translated compromised civil society's political liberties, especially from 2017, when political pressure on people's rights peaked. Below, I explain how the governmental use of new technologies resulted in a political crackdown affecting people's political liberties.

5.2.2. The governmental crackdown on political freedoms

In the previous section, I showed how the ruling party embraced digital media as a response to the earlier empowerment of Cambodia's civil society, also with the aid of digital media – one of the most meaningful political development since the coup of 1997, which made Hun Sen solo prime minister and consolidated the CPP's as the hegemonic political force in Cambodia. This part builds on the digitalisation of the ruling party and shows how pressure on people's political freedoms peaked in 2017, resulting in a political crackdown.

Most informants – ordinary citizens and CSO spokespeople – I interviewed indicated that governmental pressure on political rights increased significantly in 2017, with several respondents referring to it as the "crackdown of 2017" (r3.02; r3.18; r3.19; r3.24). A crackdown is a repressive set of measures limiting or censoring specific behaviours that someone else sees as undesirable (Chen and Fu (Eds), 2019). In the case of Cambodia, the interviews I made with civil society agents and the international and local organisations reports indicate that there was a political crackdown. So, the

authorities repressed or limited civil society's political actions and behaviours. Among them, everyday citizens, opposition parties, media, or activists.

The peak of pressure being in 2017 was not a coincidence. It was right after the local elections of 2017 that reaffirmed the CNRP political grip. "Preliminary figures gave 51.39 percent to the CPP and 44.22 percent to the CNRP. These tallies represent major losses for the ruling party and opposition gains compared with local elections in 2012" (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). In 2017, the CPP "perceived that the opposition [the CNRP] was too strong" (r1.06). Crucial to the political interest of the CPP, the 2018 national elections were approaching, and the positive results of the CNRP in the previous elections of 2013 and the latest local commissions unsettled the CPP, which explains why the political crackdown was initiated in 2017.

Citizens and CSOs referred to the crackdown differently. Citizens tended to be relatively cautious and referred to the crackdown implicitly. On the other hand, CSOs were more concise and direct, and they openly referred to the peak of pressure as a political crackdown (r3.02; r3.18.19; r3.24). Even if informants referred to increased pressure as the crackdown of 2017, censoring people's political behaviours was a process that began about two years earlier. The earliest symptoms of a large-scale political crackdown started in 2015, just two years after people's support for the CNRP soared in the national elections of 2013. Tensions between the CPP and the CNRP escalated and resulted in the breakdown of their political dialogue. Sam Rainsy – the President of the CNRP at that time – was accused of being "complicit in the falsification of public documents, the use of false public documents and incitement to cause serious chaos to security and social order in the capital, Phnom Penh" (UNOHCRH, 2015: n.p). He was summoned to appear in court in December 2015[28]. Repression against those not aligned with the ruling party affected many people. Over thirty opposition and civil society activists were arrested and prosecuted in summary trials below the international community's standards (Human Rights Watch, 2017b). One of my respondents, a human rights activist (r3.27) who had been reporting social and political injustices for years, was a victim of such pressure and was in the spotlight of the CPP. Nonetheless, he remained firmly committed to improving human rights in Cambodia, regardless of the consequences that might suppose for him. The activist explained his case.

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[28] Sam Rainsy has been was exile in France since 2015. In March 2021, he was sentenced to 25 years of prison after he tried to return to Cambodia in 2019, something that the ruling party interpreted as a plot to overthrow the Government of Cambodia. Moreover, Sam Rainy's right to vote was stripped, and he has been forbidden to stand as a candidate in future elections. Fellow opposition members Mou Sochua and Eng Chhay Eang were also sentenced to 22 years in prison, according to the CPP-friendly news outlet Fresh News.

Before, I was scared, but after I became a human rights activist, and my actions are recognised here and in the world because of social media. I am proud of what I am doing. I am using my life for useful things. I go everywhere, and almost 100% of people support my action. So, I am not scared. My life is meaningful. Dr. Kem Ley… he was killed by politics… he know… he did right, he speak right, thinking right, but because of wrong politics in Cambodia… three ways will happen. One, killing. Two, prison. Three, run away. He knew it, but why still speaking? He know is the right way but wrong politics. So, three results: killing, prison, run away. Me the same, maybe because people like me working for rights, we face problems… from the court, authority, government, but we still do it because we want people to change better for the next generation (r3.27).

Cases like (r3.27) show the pressure activists were under after the digitalisation of the ruling party. New technology helped them reaching out to the large public. Still, digital media also made them targets of the ruling party after the CPP members understood the power of social media platforms like Facebook to spread political messages. The crackdown affected the media sector too. The report Government Crackdown: Cambodia's Media on Edge (International Federation of Journalists, 2018) highlighted the crackdown's impact on people's freedom of expression. It happened in two ways. First, non-pro-government journalists were harassed. One informant (r3.17) who spoke on behalf of an organisation that worked closely with journalists explained that some of the journalists covering political issues – especially those who were more critical with the ruling party – were often intimidated, verbally and/or physically. Second, the ruling party used high-profile cases of people who openly attacked the Government to spread fear and convey that the CPP must not be criticised.

One of these cases was Kem Ley's assassination, which I explained earlier. He was killed after he used a radio station to make several controversial comments against the ruling party. Cases like Kem Ley's increased journalists' insecurity, who feared being targeted by the ruling party (International Federation of Journalists, 2018). Pressure against online and offline media outlets resulted in independent newspapers and radio stations being forced to shut (Human Rights Watch, 2017b), such as the English-language newspaper Cambodia Daily (Reuters, 2017; Westerman, 2017), one of the most popular local newspapers issued in the English language.

The Cambodia Daily was slapped with a $6.3 million tax bill last month after Prime Minister Hun Sen ordered an investigation into private organizations operating in the country. The paper, founded in 1993, was given the deadline to come up with the millions the government said it owed from back taxes accrued over the last 10 years (Westerman, 2017, n.p).

Social media users – everyday citizens – did not escape the crackdown either. In 2018, Freedom House (2018) reported that individuals were harshly penalised for their online activity. "Prosecutions for online speech continued during the reporting period, as the government cracked down on dissenting voices in both the political opposition and the general public, especially during the run-up to the 2018 elections" (Freedom House, 2018, n.p). The authors of those posts – some of them were several years old – were charged with cases of defamation, discrimination, insults of a public official, and lèse-majesté (CCHR, 2019). The crackdown reached international media, such as Ieng Cholsa's case, a citizen sentenced to three years in prison and to pay $1,250 for an old Facebook post criticising the monarchy, raising concerns among human rights defenders, who feared that the ruling party was using them to stifle dissent (Reuters, 2019).

The tipping point of the governmental pressure was the dissolution of the opposition party CNRP in November 2017. As I have shown earlier in this chapter, the CNRP had obtained significant political gains since 2013 and was the only political threat to Hun Sen's regime (Ben and Baliga, 2017). Moreover, the CNRP also obtained very satisfactory results in the commune elections in summer 2017. The CPP got 50.76% of the popular vote, whereas the CNRP received 48.83%[29] (ANFREL, 2017). "These tallies represent[ed] major losses for the ruling party and opposition gains compared with local elections in 2012" (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). Given the CNRP strength and that the national elections of 2018 were looming, the CPP "perceived that the opposition was too strong" (r1.06), and the dismantlement of the CNRP began with the arrest of Kem Sohka's[30] – former CNRP's President – on the 3rd of September 2017. Hence, the crackdown *of 2017.* Kem Sokha was arrested and charged with treason to topple Hun Sen's government (Ben and Baliga, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017b) – a politically motivated trial, according to the United Nations (OHCHR, n.d).

> Kem Sokha has been charged with treason for discussing the training on democracy and party-building his party received from United States government-funded organizations. These organizations have also long provided similar training to the CPP (Human Rights Watch, 2017b).

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[29] The remaining approximately 10% was for smaller parties such as the Khmer National United Party (KNUP), FUNCINPEC, or the Beehive Social Democratic Party (BSDP) (ANFREL, 2017).

[30] "Kem Sokha's arrest followed multiple trumped-up criminal cases and convictions against the CNP's founding president, Sam Rainsy. Sam Rainsy has been forced into exile to avoid long prison terms in cases that have been rubber-stamped by the Supreme Court."

In November 2017, the Supreme Court ordered the dissolution of the party. Moreover, 118 senior CNRP officials were banned from any political activity in the Kingdom for five years – the Phnom Penh Post said that was Cambodia's "death of democracy" (Ben and Baliga, 2017, n.p). After that, Hun Sen pressured CNRP representatives who had won seats in the commune elections just a few months earlier to switch parties and join the CPP (Human Rights Watch, 2017b). Still, later on, he reverted his decision and banned them from politics (Azira, 2018). The governmental pressure on political freedoms shows how the CPP used repression against its political opponents and co-opted the political system, allowing Hun Sen to neutralise dissenting voices' threat while maintaining a democratic façade. Moreover, co-opting the digital sphere allowed him to rewrite the rules of social media. While platforms like Facebook have not been banned and can be used freely, he conveyed that they should not be used to oppose the regime.

The CPP embracement of new technology and the governmental crackdown on political liberties show how the ruling party responded to civil society's earlier digitalisation and political empowerment of civil society. The digital strategy of the CPP combined online gentle moves to make its members look more approachable with aggressive measures to put pressure on civil society political liberties. Those measures were online and offline and impacted how citizens and CSOs engaged with politics while keeping some basic democratic structures. As I mentioned earlier, the ruling party used the digital sphere to target dissenting voices and carried out most of its repression in the offline world shows that we must understand the online and offline government actions together. In the next chapter, I will explore the hybridisation of the public sphere in greater detail.

5.3. Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the intersection between digital media and politics in Cambodia in the 2010s. It has shown that civil society and the state sector embraced digital tools and media to gain power in the political sphere and remain politically hegemonic, respectively. In the first half of that decade, especially in the 2013 elections, civil society benefited from digital media to break the culture of political fear forged over the years. That started empowering Cambodia's civil society. However, in the second half of the 2010s, the ruling party also embraced digital media, responding to the earlier empowerment of civil society. Its digital strategy encompassed gentle practices like using Facebook to disseminate its activities and aggressive techniques like surveillance to spread fear among people and repress potentially threatening dissenting actions. Altogether, that resulted in a political crackdown that limited citizens' political liberties.

This chapter leads to two crucial outcomes regarding *how* (Ley Gutierrez, 2014) civil society engagement in politics in the digital era – rather than quantifying it. First, digital media can increase *non-traditional* political participation. On the one hand, I endorse that fear correlates with low political engagement, especially non-traditional participation (Dammert, 2012; Vasilopoulos, 2018). The Cambodia case showed that, before the popularisation of digital democracy, non-traditional political engagement was limited – unlike electoral democracy – primarily because many people lived in fear due to the dominance of the CPP. However, on the other hand, the Cambodia case also showed that new technology played a crucial role in easing respondents' political fear. Digital media helped members of civil society reduce their ted access to opposing political forces, political isolation, and self-censorship (Alves, 1990), which allowed civil society to engage more in non-traditional politics. Therefore, this study adds value to the existing scholarly literature pointing out that new technology is a helpful mechanism to reduce political fear and strengthen political participation in post-authoritarian and illiberal regimes. Still, not all citizens benefit from digital media equally. However, the digital divide shows that not all citizens benefit from new technology equally or to the same extent. Those with strong critical thinking skills are more likely to ease political fear and increase their non-traditional participation in politics. In Cambodia, this *usually* means young people with a higher degree of formal education.

Second, the state of political fear is not static and changes in response to the political environment. Fear has been a vital element in the politics of Cambodia since long before the arrival of digital media. With the arrival and popularisation of the internet in the country, members of civil society reduced their political fear. Therefore, digital media eased the negative impact of political fear among people and reshaped the political landscape. However, with the digitalisation of the CPP and crackdown on people's political freedoms, the ruling party limited people's capacity to overcome their political fear and reshaped the political scene and the state of democracy in the country again. Therefore, context determines the extent to which fear impacts people's lives and its relationship with the state sector. In the next chapter, I will evaluate the comeback of political fear.

These outcomes answer the second secondary research question, "how does civil society's digitalisation change political participation in Cambodia?" This chapter has explained the political crackdown of 2017. Still, it has not provided an in-depth analysis of its impact. The next chapter explores the revival of political fear after the crackdown and how civil society experienced the consequences.

6. Cambodia's political landscape after the crackdown of 2017

> *Self-censorship has permeated and is omni-present 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)*.*

In the two previous chapters, I presented the culture of political fear as a well-embedded trait of the politics of Cambodia, which civil society eased with the help of digital tools and media in the early 2010s. I also showed that the ruling party reacted to people's political empowerment and used the internet to regain its political traction. The digitalisation of the CPP in the mid-2010s resulted in increased pressure on people's political liberties. Pressure peaked in 2017, and the crackdown's repercussions on people's public lives were noticeable when I did fieldwork in Cambodia in 2019.

Some of my informants have recently been severely hit by the crackdown. As far as I am aware, since I finished my fieldwork in September 2019, the police had arrested or brought in for questioning at least four of my informants due to their political activism. The cases of my informants are not isolated examples. International organisations such as Amnesty International (2020) reported that state authorities had arrested numerous activists defending the Cambodian people's human rights. In the frame of the ongoing crackdown, activists and social groups fighting for the rule of law, justice, and human rights have faced state harassment, including members of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) (Freedom House, 2019). Moreover, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), an American NGO aiming at promoting democratic governance, was forced to cease its operations in Cambodia in 2017 (ibid).

The challenges NGO workers and activists have been facing since 2017 contrast with the political atmosphere in 2013. Civil society agents used digital media to ease political fear and participate in politics, especially in non-traditional forms of engagement such as online and offline debates or participating in political rallies. In this chapter, I explore the post-crackdown state of democracy. I contend that the increased pressure on people's liberties resulted in a new wave of political fear and, overall, in a democratic contraction that countered the democratic progress that Cambodia had made with the arrival of digital democracy in the early 2010s. I also demonstrate that citizens and CSOs benefited from digital media to develop new strategies to overcome, to some extent, their limited influence in the public sphere.

To build this argument, I split the chapter into two sections. In the first one, I sustain that the political crackdown of 2017 resulted in a new wave of political fear. The characteristics of the new wave were people's decreased social and political trust, weak citizen networks, citizen political isolation, and self-censorship (Alves, 1990). Those are the same elements that I used to describe political fear in Chapter 5. However, new technology facilitated had a crucial role in the new wave of fear and complemented offline methods of political repression.

The second part investigates two civil society's strategies to build trust and adapt to the new political landscape. First, using new technology to identify specific like-minded people to engage and collaborate with. Second, using digital media to create citizen networks in the offline world. These two strategies promoted the creation of trust, one of the main hurdles to overcome the new wave of political fear, which improved the public sphere's interactive and integrative functions. In investigating the implication of the crackdown and how civil society responded to it, I highlight how the digitalisation of the state sector impacted political participation. More broadly, this allows me to explain how participation was affected concerning the previous empowerment of civil society, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of new technology and political participation.

6.1. A hybrid wave of political fear and preventive repression

This section explains fear in the post-crackdown years. It conveys two key ideas. First, I show that a generalised feeling of political fear among informants followed the crackdown of 2017. Fear reached ordinary citizens and members of CSOs. Second, I analyse the nature of the new wave of fear. On the one hand, I show that the fundamental elements of the new culture of fear are the same as those of the old one. Those are limited access to opposition forces, political isolation, and self-censorship. The critical difference is that, in the post-crackdown era, digital technology helped the state sector restore the culture of fear, resulting in a wave of political repression.

On the other hand, I explain that fear was hybridised. Regardless of the importance of digital technology, fear still relied a lot on the analogue sphere. The ruling party incorporated digital elements to make the culture of fear highly effective in the offline world. The claims I make in this section are essential because I analyse how civil society responded to the new political landscape after the crackdown in the second half of the chapter.

6.1.1. The comeback of political fear

When I interviewed my informants in 2019, two years after the peak of the crackdown, nearly all informants described the arrival of a new wave of political fear. They also indicated that this wave had been a setback to their political lives. Most interviewees talked about fear only after giving them a cue. For example, I would ask them whether they felt comfortable talking about the ruling party with me. They would typically say they did not. Nonetheless, very slowly, as the interview progressed, they shared more about their political stands. Then, fear would generally come up in the conversation, and, gradually, most informants became less reluctant to express their political opinions, and our discussions became more intense and personal.

Three-quarters of the citizens I interviewed talked about fear primarily to express dissatisfaction with that moment's political scene. For example, one citizen said that she was unhappy with politics because she was "concerned about human rights. If anyone has any [political] idea that seems to be against the Government, they will face the consequences" (r2.07). That is why, according to an activist, "the population is scared about [politics]. If [people] talk in public or if they show their opinion, then they know that they might also end up going to jail, or something that will affect their lives is going to happen to them" (r3.04). These two testimonies used terms or expressions like "fac[ing] consequences" (r2.07) and "something that will affect their lives is going to happen" (r3.04) without being too explicit about what that meant. However, other informants used examples of that. For instance, one citizen used the assassination of Kem Ley[31]: "You know that some people got killed because they spoke out. That's concerning" (r2.17).

The fact that most informants ended up talking about politics with me indicated two things. First, politics was an important issue to most of my informants – as I observed in Chapter 5 – and trust was vital to discuss political issues. Citizens only felt comfortable talking about politics with me after I showed them I was just "only" trying to understand politics in Cambodia, and I could be trusted. Second, when some informants said, "the population is scared of politics" (r2.07), they meant they were afraid of talking about politics *publicly*. As I will explain, even in the digital era, many citizens become politically emancipated in the private, offline space (Papacharissi, 2010).

A quarter of informants were less explicit or went off the tangent to avoid answering some of my questions that might have seemed too political. One informant (r2.12) said that he was not scared of politics because politics did not concern him since everything was in the hands of the Government.

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[31] Refer to Norén-Nilsson (2018).

Therefore, he said he had nothing to comment on and systematically avoided answering my questions. He said, "No… I am not interested in this kind of [political] actions. I am only interested in my work" (r2.12). Among all the citizens I interviewed, just five said they were not scared of politics. Of those five people, only one (r2.12) was a senior citizen. The rest (r3.01; r2.12; r2.18; r2.19) were 28 or younger, showing the importance that age carries since it sorts citizens who experienced conflict before the PPA and those who did not. So, considering that only five informants claimed they were not afraid of politics, it is safe to say that in 2019, fear of addressing political ideas in *public* was a generalised feeling among people in the sample.

Fear was also a recurrent theme in the interviews with CSO representatives. Their spokespeople, like citizens, acknowledged that fear had worsened people's public life and political engagement since governmental pressure increased in 2015. Unlike citizens, CSOs did not hesitate to talk about fear and eventually introduced the topic before I did (r3.26). Whenever their spokespeople did not bring up the issue, I did. I decided to be more assertive and ask about fear – my encounter with fear[32] and the answers some citizens had provided indicated that fear was an essential element that profoundly shaped public life. Ensuring that fear was part of the conversation was beneficial in two ways. First, CSO workers offered a comprehensive yet detailed view of people's experiences with fear since many organisations worked at a grassroots level. Second, many CSO spokespeople shared their own encounters with fear – and some of them gave me advice on how to deal with fear and stay safe during fieldwork. They all had unique experiences with fear. In some cases, many organisations had to adapt to the new situation and change their strategy, mainly if they worked at a grassroots level. The spokesperson of an NGO (r3.14) explained how some organisations learned to live with fear.

> Some NGOs start to change their approach. Now, they do not want to work anymore at a grassroots level. They don't want to empower [people], offer training or meetings… So, less networking and less capacity building. Instead, they try to organise it safely – in the city or a private place. I cannot say this is useless, but it's less effective, and people are afraid to speak (r3.14).

In other cases, the workers of some organisations feared for their safety. For example, as I explained in the introduction of Chapter 4, undercover state authorities permanently monitored the office of two informants (r3.18; r3.19) who worked for the same NGO. These two respondents commented that being monitored made them worry about the safety of their families too. So, fear after the

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[32] See the introduction in Chapter 4.

crackdown of 2017 reshaped how some CSOs operated, and it also impacted the lives of their staff and their families.

Not all my informants worked for an organisation. Some respondents that I label as CSO – some activists or researchers, for instance – did independent work without the protection of any institution. They felt particularly defenceless and vulnerable, especially those with loud and powerful voices addressing politically sensitive issues. The spokesperson of an organisation working closely with journalists said that "in case you are an active political activist, then you will be recognised by the Government. If you are an ordinary person who complains about a road, then you can do whatever" (r3.12). Those who were not part of any organisation felt much pressure because their actions were directly associated with their name and image – rather than an organisation. They dealt with a tremendous amount of stress. Some respondents (r3.14; r3.17) mentioned that some of their colleagues – other activists and journalists – chose to flee the country because they feared being targeted by the Government. International media outlets have reported the cases of civil society members who decided to flee the country. For example, in 2017, Aun Pheap, a local journalist, fled the country fearing arrest after being charged with incitement to commit a felony after interviewing former members of opposition political parties (Prak, 2018).

Those conversations with my informants showed that a new wave of political fear defined the political landscape after the governmental crackdown on people's political liberties. In Chapter 5, I outlined that the elements that make up the culture of political fear are people's lack of access to opposition forces, political isolation, and self-censorship. In the early 2010s, several members of civil society eased their fear thanks to new technology since they gained access to alternative political narratives, built bridges with other people and organisations, and, overall, civil society political self-censorship was reduced. Below, I show that the new wave of fear consisted of the same three elements (Alves, 1990). Still, a key difference was that digital technology helped the state sector revive political fear.

6.1.2. Fear and preventive repression

Illiberal regimes are more likely to legitimise their actions through actions of repression (Babayan, 2017) that lead to fear. In Cambodia, the digitalisation of the state sector consisted of measures to repress online and offline dissent to trigger fear among people and organisations and minimise the threat of anti-governmental actions. As Dragu and Lupu (2021) suggest, researchers must shift their attention towards *preventive* repression in the digital era to understand how new technology in the

hands of illiberal regimes impacts civil society. Preventive repression refers to "the set of activities governments use to reduce the risk that opposition groups threaten governments' power, including opposition efforts to mobilize and organize public dissent" (pp.2–3). Actions of preventive repression include identifying political opponents to track and monitor their activities or neutralising protests through some type of prohibition before they become a real threat to the stability of the ruling political elites (Dragu and Przeworski, 2019). That can be done through new legislation or with the arrest of dissenting voices. In other words, preventive repression aims to contend the actions of political opponents before they occur, usually through non-violent means (Greitens, Lee and Yazici, 2020), to stop future threats to the hegemony of the political elites.

In contrast, reactive repression takes place after dissent has taken action and has threatened the stability of a regime. So, it is "repression in response to overt dissent" (De Jaegher and Hoyer, 2019, p.503) that might involve the use of violence. However, these two types of repression are not mutually exclusive, and governments might employ both simultaneously (ibid). In Chapter 4, I provided examples of reactive repression in the democratic era in Cambodia. First, with the attacks that the CPP perpetrated against its political opponents before the elections of 1993. Second, with the coup and violent attacks Hun Sen staged in 1997 to oust his co-PM and become solo PM. As Dragu and Lupu (2021) argue, distinguishing between these two types of dissent is crucial because each kind of repression operates in different contexts, resulting in various abuses. In the digital era, differentiating between the two and paying particular attention to preventive repression is vital. While it does not usually trigger physical violence, preventive repression can still pave the way for illiberal regimes to develop new ways of using digital media to achieve their political aims (ibid).

Here, I focus on preventive repression. I show how the ruling party used digital media to repress actions of non-traditional participation, resulting in a wave of fear that restrained the overall democratic progress made in the first half of the 2010s. The new wave of political fear consisted of the same fundamental elements as the pre-digital climate of fear: limited access to opposition forces, political isolation, self-censorship (Alves, 1990). Still, the novelty is that the ruling party employed digital media to restore political fear.

People's distrust towards social media

When I discussed political participation after the crackdown with my informants, most of them mentioned social and political distrust. Trust is a fundamental element in functioning democracies

because it gives people confidence that others will act reliably (Goddard, 2003). In other words, party A trusts party B when A believes that B's interests are aligned with theirs. In the absence of trust, A might be afraid that B will make their interests prevail. In the Cambodian context, distrust is not a new issue. According to representatives of CSOs (r1.05; r1.06; r3.14; r3.21; r3.26), distrust is an old concern that already existed much before the PPA when the political situation in the country was delicate due to conflict and political instability (r3.21)[33].

In the digital context, respondents talked about distrust in the online sphere, which they saw as a threat to their safety should they criticise the ruling party. Many citizens benefited from digital media to access information to increase their interaction with other actors. However, they also became aware that activists and citizens had been detained due to their peaceful demonstrations to support human rights in the country, which had primarily been organised using social media. For example, in September 2020, there was a wave of arrests against peaceful protesters.

> Ten young people, including a Buddhist monk and a musician, have been arbitrarily detained and charged with 'incitement' between 13 August and 7 September [2020]. All ten detainees are considered prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International, meaning they have been detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their protected human rights (Amnesty International, 2020, n.p).

Informants perceived that the net was unsafe to criticise the ruling party or organise political protests against it. Consequently, many people feared it due to potential reprisals (r2.08; r2.13). None of the respondents who feared the digital sphere had been arrested or directly harassed. Still, they were afraid because they had read about the cases of arrests over incitement, which resulted in a moral panic, a feeling of fear that arouses social concern over an issue (Scott (Ed), 2014). People became afraid of facing reprisals should their online activity be seen as contrary to the Government, especially after reading about other people who used digital technology to protest against the ruling party. That news transcended to the broader public, precisely, through social media, feeding people's fear. Hence their distrust towards the digital sphere.

Consequently, some people were reluctant to use the internet to engage in politics. For example, one citizen (r2.15) explained he feared being politically active in the online sphere because of the waves of arrests against those who used social media to comment on politics and oppose the CPP. While he did not trust social media to engage in political actions, he used social media with non-political ends

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[33] See Chapter 4.

and only used Facebook to receive the business updates he needed for work. However, other informants utterly stopped using the internet and social media for political and non-political aims. One informant (r2.09) said she could not trust digital technology because she was unsure who might be monitoring her on the internet.

> I don't know who is there. I don't know who is watching, and I don't know anything. I am also afraid that someone might record my voice when I'm talking about politics, and they use it to threaten me or my family [...]. I have an example from some of my neighbours. I know that they were recorded when talking about politics and, later on, as they were suspicious, someone came in trying to kill them (r2.09).

(r2.09) and (r2.15) had never been targeted themselves, yet they were both living in fear. Moreover, they pointed out that many other citizens were also fearful and distrusted new technology to comment on political issues. They could not trust the digital sphere because they were unsure about who might be listening, reading, keeping a record of their activity (2.08; 2.09), or even who might have hacked their social media accounts (r2.06). They worried that they could be targeted by state authorities or reported by other people to criticise the ruling party.

In the context of digital authoritarianism, trust is vital because when people do not trust agents like media, they fall into despair and disengage from political processes (Yayboke, 2020). From the democratic lens, it is counterproductive because it makes thick or substantive democracy challenging to achieve (Yayboke, 2020). These findings align with the view that trust is a necessary element that strengthens political participation (Burton, 1966; Conge et al., 1988; Norris, 2011; Nye, 1997). Still, context remains a highly relevant factor (Zmerli and Hooghe (Eds), 2011) to explain *how* trust changes participation – rather than focusing on whether trust increases or decreases participation.

One of these contextual elements is the governmental embracement of digital technology. As I have shown, many respondents did not trust social media since the ruling party embraced it, and several of them were less engaged in non-traditional forms of participation like debates. Still, most of them praised electoral democracy, and voter turnout in the 2018 elections was 80.4% (McCargo, 2018). This way, the ruling party used elections to legitimise its power. It also used social media as a mechanism for preventive repression and control (Hier, 2008; Rohloff and Wright, 2010), preventing most informants from engaging in political actions that could be interpreted as an obstacle to the political dominance of the ruling party. Therefore, new technology contributed to making thin democracy thinner.

Weak social networks and political isolation

People's distrust towards other citizens and political authorities reconfigured people's social networks. As (r1.06), a political analyst, indicated, social networks were reshaped, not broken. My data analysis suggests that people's networks became less inclusive in offline and online spheres, which fed preventive repression since they became too politically isolated to protest. In the analogue world, informants were more thoughtful in allowing new members into their existing networks (ibid). As a young citizen indicated, "face to face, we talk in our circle, not with other people. They [other members] will not say that I complain about the Government" (r2.08).

Informants like (r2.08) limited their face-to-face interactions to those who could be trusted because they believed they would not report them if they criticised the Government. Interactions in the online sphere also became limited, and people carefully chose whom they engaged with. One netizen (r2.07) said that social networks were limited to people who could be trusted when they wanted to talk about political matters. Like the analogue sphere, trusted people were primarily relatives and very close friends. So, digital networks were also tighter. The views of another citizen (r2.17) reinforced the idea that expressing political opinions on the internet was limited to people who could be trusted.

> To be honest, I do not want to fully engage in social media; I don't mind sharing on social media, but it's about… you have to be careful when you speak about politics, it's about if you understand about the government. I am willing to share stories, but we also have to be smart. We can share, but we cannot express fully to everyone. But if it is a friend or so… then you can trust them, and you can share the stories with my opinions (r2.17).

The cases of (r2.08) and (r2.17) show two critical issues. First, all respondents highlighted the importance of relationships based on trust. They pointed out that trust was typically created during their face-to-face interactions with family members, friends, or, at least, with "people who I can know they have similar interests to mine" (r2.18). Second, people's generalised distrust towards the political elites and other citizens contracted their social networks online and offline. Therefore, even with all the advantages of digital technology, most informants preferred the analogue sphere to create and keep relationships of trust because face-to-face interactions made them feel safer than the online sphere. This view was shared across the sample in terms of gender, age, and education. The fact that most informants felt more comfortable in the offline sphere and that interaction had to be based on trust meant that interacting with people outside their networks was less likely. It became increasingly difficult for people to assemble groups to plan dissenting actions, contributing to the governmental

activity of preventive repression (Sullivan, 2016). This way, citizen's efforts to undermine state authorities became unlikely.

Distrust also challenged the task of organisations like NGOs and activists to form social networks. Organisations struggled to use social media to engage citizens in their activities the same way they used to. The leader of an NGO (r3.14) that organised gatherings to strengthen civil society and report social injustice explained that digital technology and social media platforms like Facebook were essential for his organisation to arrange meetings. However, since the crackdown of 2017, it became highly "challenging to mobilise [people] and get them together to take action" (r3.14), resulting in a relative" analogue demobilisation".

Moreover, many organisations also struggled due to new legislation like the Law on Association and NGOs[34] further weakened civil society. The Law sets up registration requirements for domestic and international NGOs, with domestic groups registered with and supervised by the Ministry of the Interior and international bodies managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. "Over the last few years, the Government tried to pass laws to limit the rights of the civil society. The Law on Association and NGOs [35] is one example. They became a weapon for the Government to restrict NGO and other groups" (r3.21). As (r3.21) indicated, those laws minimised the impact of NGOs and weakened civil society even further.

The examples that everyday citizens and CSOs have provided show that people's opportunities to interact with other people and organisations changed. While social networks did not disappear, they were reshaped due to people's lack of trust in digital technology. Networks still existed, but since most interactions happened in the offline sphere because people distrusted the internet due to their fear of being harassed, informants had fewer opportunities to reach citizens outside their usual networks. One of the main benefits of digital technology – building bridges among and between civil society representatives to access opposition forces – had partially been lost, contributing to their political isolation and decreased political grip of many CSOs. According to Alves (1990), limited people's access to a diversity of political agents and political isolation are two of the three elements that make up the culture of political fear. These two elements limited people's opportunities for political mobilisation, an essential component to thicken democracy and allow people to discuss and debate political issues

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[34] Curley (2018) offers and analysis of the Law on Associations and Non-governmental Organisations in Cambodia ("NGO Law") and its implications.

[35] Curley (2018) offers and analysis of the Law on Associations and Non-governmental Organisations in Cambodia ("NGO Law") and its implications.

that would enable them to build their political mindsets. Instead, the governmental actions reshaped social networks and resulted in increased preventive repression and fear. The third element found in the culture of fear, self-censorship, is analysed below.

Self-censorship

Many informants had been self-censoring their political views since 2017. Self-censorship is the act of intentionally keeping information from others with or without formal impediments against freedom of speech like laws or norms (Bar-Tal, 2017; Cook and Heilmann, 2010). It blocks the free flow of information necessary to keep people well-informed, knowledgeable, and capable of making reasoned choices and judgements (Almond and Verba, 1963; Bar-Tal, 2017; Dahl, 2006). From a democratic lens, keeping information or opinions from others impedes the fulfilment of democratic principles, especially when it comes to a substantive democracy.

Self-censorship is particularly relevant in illiberal contexts, where citizens might use it as a technique to avoid trouble. "[…] authoritarian states spawn a culture of political self-censorship: fearing punishment from the state for airing potentially objectionable views, citizens engage in preference falsification in their political talk or opt out of such talk altogether"(Chang and Manion, 2021, p.1363). In this study, exploring self-censorship is essential because it was a recurrent theme during the interviews when respondents talked about their political engagement since 2015. Moreover, it is the third element of the culture of fear, according to Alves' (1990), complementing limited access to opposition forces and political isolation.

From a theoretical standpoint, the spiral of silence (SOS) gives an account of self-censorship. The SOS theory assumes that when divergent voices arise in a social group, these might be or might feel isolated from the rest of the group. Since individuals hate being isolated from a social group, the SOS theory claims that people might choose to censor themselves and become "spectators" (Hayes, Matthes and Eveland, 2013; Noelle-Neumann, 1993) avoid being isolated. Even though this theory was coined before the popularisation of digital media, it still applies to the current digital era. Gearhart and Zhang (2015) argue that people who receive adverse reactions to their political posts on social media are more likely to avoid similar interactions in the future, which leads to self-censorship. However, this does not mean that people stop using social media entirely. Even if the SOS theory applies to the digital sphere, one problem is that it omits the specific contextual settings that determine how, when, or under what circumstances people might choose to censor their views (Bar-Tal, 2017). Variables such as actors involved, type of censorship (public vs private), space, and context

(what is being censored and why) (Bar-Tal, 2017; Cook and Heilmann, 2010) are therefore to be considered when applying the theory.

When addressing political issues in illiberal contexts, there is a constant tension between dissenting voices seeking to point out government transgressions to democratise the political landscape (Goh, 2015; Reuter and Szakonyi, 2015; Tang and Huhe, 2014) and state authorities who prosecute dissent to silence them (Deibert (Ed), 2012; King, Pan and Roberts, 2017). To explain who self-censors on social media, Ong (2021) proposes the following:

> An individual self-censors when he or she expects the costs of online political expression to outweigh its benefits. In other words, social media self-censorship occurs when the expected pay-off for expressing one's political opinion online is negative. Assuming that the benefits of online political expression, such as self-gratification, is constant across politically engaged social media users, the degree of self-censorship is likely to vary depending on the expected costs of online political expression. The expected costs to online political expression are, in turn, primarily a function of an individual's expected probability of encountering state-initiated repression, as well as the actual penalty of repression (p.142).

In the Cambodia case, I found self-censorship common among ordinary citizens and CSOs when discussing political matters. A political analyst said that "the strategy of the Government is to silence key actors like NGOs, media, or the opposition with the creation of customized laws, something that consequently fosters self-censorship" (r1.06). Overall, they practised self-censorship because they feared being targeted by state authorities or fellow citizens. Therefore, costs of expression exceeded benefits. So, the SOS theory explains that many citizens opted to silence their political views to avoid being easily identifiable divergent voices.

I found two variants of self-censorship among informants: self-refrainment – or silence – and respondents who changed their discourses when talking to others. The first type, self-refrainment, was the predominant type of self-censorship that I identified among informants. They practised this type of censorship to avoid putting themselves in the spotlight of the ruling party being harassed like other fellow citizens or activists whose cases were all over social media platforms. The most salient example was the assassination of the political analyst Kem Ley in 2016[36]. Several informants used his example to express fear and hesitance to criticise the ruling party, as this young citizen:

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[36] See Norén-Nillson (2018).

> Honestly, I get the information [through social media]… But you know Kem Ley. He talked about politics, he said something that makes sense, he says what he wanted to say about politics to the citizens [sic], and I think that he spoke truthfully. After that, he died because someone killed him. So, I think that maybe it's the real thing. I am scared of the Government (r2.06).

Self-censoring one's views is common in illiberal settings. Other studies in authoritarian contexts highlight that people's pervasive fear of state punishment is the primary reason to self-censor their political views (Chang and Manion, 2021). People's social networks and relationships based on trust determine when they self-censored their political opinions. As I indicated earlier, most informants said they felt more comfortable around people they trusted, primarily relatives and close friends, when they were more willing to share their political views. As (r2.13) indicated, "I do [talk about politics], but I choose the people I talk to. For example, the ones I trust, like family members or close friends. Those I cannot trust… I never talk to them" (r2.13). This view matters because it indicates that self-censorship should not be seen in absolute terms but as a relative concept. Informants who said they did not talk about politics rarely meant they did not talk about politics *at all*. Instead, it means they did not talk about politics with people outside their circles of trust or publicly. Therefore, low trust indicated higher chances of political self-refrainment to avoid feeling excluded, exposed, and potentially targeted by the ruling party.

The spokespeople of several CSOs also described situations of self-censorship. In some cases, the organisation self-censored its views and stopped showing its political stands. For example, (r3.24) was a member of a CSO that organised political gatherings. Since the crackdown, the members of her group felt their meetings were being monitored due to the political content discussed there. They agreed they would continue discussing political issues/ Still, they would avoid talking about "sensitive stuff" (r3.24) that could be seen as a way of criticising governmental policies – it was a safer option, that informant said. The case of a political analyst (r1.06) further exemplifies self-censorship. His case differed from that of (r3.24) because he was not part of a larger organisation. As a political analyst, he did not feel safe expressing their political insights since the crackdown began, especially because other actors were weaker – he mentioned the dissolution of the CNRP – so he felt isolated, defenceless, and fearful. So, he said that "it is better not to talk, sometimes" (r1.06). These examples demonstrate that some people censored their political views to avoid being targeted or harasses by state authorities.

The distinction and link between online and offline self-censorship are also relevant. As I indicated in previous sections, cases of self-refrainment were common in both spheres, especially in the former, over their concern over who might be monitoring their activity. Self-censorship also applied to the

analogue space, where the distinction between public and private spheres became essential. On the one hand, most respondents would not have a political discussion in public. To show the contrast, people gathering in cafes to talk about politics in the context of the 2013 elections was not unusual, as one citizen (r3.01) who took part in some of them indicated. However, after the crackdown, many of those regular customers "say that they, too, fear speaking too loudly around the wrong company" (Ben and Paviour, 2017, n.p). On the other hand, informants claimed that having a political conversation in the private (analogue) sphere was acceptable because they felt safer than in the online sphere. They were surrounded by trusted people and could control who was listening to them (r2.01; r3.18; r3.19; r2.06; r2.15).

The second form of self-censorship that I identified was less common among informants. It consisted of respondents who changed their political views or, in other terms, falsified them (Chang and Manion, 2021). One of the respondents who did it was (r2.04). He avoided having political arguments with someone whose political stands were different or when the interlocutor was someone in a position of power or from another political party.

> Yes, [sometimes I have changed my narrative]. Maybe you are talking to someone, and you did not know that such a person belongs to a specific party. Then you find out that, indeed, such a person belongs to that party. You have to be careful (r2.04).

The case of (r2.04) showed that he carefully chose what he said due to political reasons. He did not want to be in a situation where he would disagree with someone whose political views were different. That was not an uncommon practice. As one citizen (r2.08) indicated, another reason to falsify one's political narrative was to avoid discrepancies with someone perceived as more powerful, such as People related to those in power structures, or, simply, the son or daughter of a police officer. Changing narratives was a strategy to prevent unwanted arguments, discrepancies, and getting into unwanted trouble with other people who might have different political views (r2.01; r3.18; r3.19; r2.06; r2.15; r2.13). As a citizen said, "I keep them [political opinions] to myself […]. It's okay when we talk, and we have similar opinions, but if they don't like the same party as I do, this can cause some problems" (r2.14). In short, people falsified or hid their political views to avoid being targeted as a dissenting voice.

This form of self-censorship had one variant. Some respondents choose using *only* a positive narrative about the Government, a strategy some informants named "saying the right thing" (r2.03) or "speaking the truth" about the Government (r2.14). This technique reassembled an act of resignation

and acceptance of the ruling party's dominance. They would make sure that all they said about the Government was correct and expressed positively. This practice is not uncommon in authoritarian regimes, where citizens fear that fellow citizens or state authorities become aware of their political discrepancies with the government (Robinson and Tannenberg, 2019). For example, (r2.14) said that "yes, I am [scared]. But if it's the truth, then I am not scared […]. I only make good comments, and the ones that are true. That's why I am not scared". (r2.03) provided another example.

> Now, the Government is not like before, and people can say anything but with some limits. This means that, sometimes, people say things without evidence. I can criticise the Government. Limits are not using bad words or bad photos against the Government […] (r2.03)

Compared to the previous form of self-censorship, the distinction between the online and offline sphere was less clear. Those who only made positive comments about the ruling party did not distinguish between in-person and digital situations. They agreed that expressing political views was *not* dangerous as long as they only made positive comments. I still label this practice as self-censorship because respondents were selective on the opinions they expressed and the ones they did not.

Overall, respondents who did not express their views or changed their narratives to avoid revealing their true positionality reflected a case of public censorship[37] between civil society and the state (Cook and Heilmann, 2010). The former was the censored agent, and the latter was the public agent that acted as the censor. Due to the pressure of the ruling party, informants claimed to censor their views because they were afraid that the state authority would find them undesirable (Chen and Fu (Eds), 2019). I identified examples of self-censorship in the online and offline spheres, but cases were more common in the former. Informants felt safer in the analogue sphere as long as they could trust their interlocutors[38]. Therefore, self-censorship was a defence mechanism against the threat of being excluded from a safe environment free of potential governmental harassment.

Along with limited access to opposing forces and politically isolated citizens, self-censorship accounts for a new wave of fear. Along with difficulty in reaching other civil society agents and political isolation, self-censorship is also the third element of the culture of fear (Alves, 1990). Together, these elements explain the wave of political fear since the mid-2010s. The governmental use of technology accounts

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[37] In contrast, in a case of private self-censorship, censor and censee are the same actor; in this case, individuals censor their views to adhere to certain standards, such as norms or laws (Cook and Heilmann, 2010)

[38] It is important to note that, in this case, private vs public refers to the space, which differs from the dichotomy public vs private used by Cook and Heilmann (2010) to refer to two different types of self-censorship.

for the transformation of autocratic rule in Cambodia, where the CPP has incorporated digital media in the "menu of autocratic innovation" (Morgenbesser, 2020: 1054) to maintain its political dominance. Digital repression refers to "the use of new technologies – primarily the Internet, social media, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) – to repress citizens and maintain political control" (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor and Wright, 2020, p.1).

6.1.3. How digital media strengthened analogue fear

The wave of political fear that began in 2015 and the development of digital repression impacted the public life of virtually all informants. With new technology, the Government could repress dissenting voices and maintain its political hegemony (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor and Wright, 2020). Digital repression empowers autocratic governments because it supercharges established methods. For example, before the arrival of digital media, censorship required large groups of people loyal to the ruling party, and the process was notably slow (Feldstein, 2019; Koehler, 1999). However, in the digital era, new technology and artificial intelligence have lowered the costs of repression and made processes like censorship easier.

Even in the current digital era, autocratic governments still combine digital repression with old methods of repression – the latter include the use of violence to repress dissenting voices or the arrests of critics (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor and Wright, 2020). However, research offering an overview of the broader picture indicating whether digital repression replaces old methods is still scarce and non-existent in the Cambodian case. As Frantz, Kendal-Taylor and Wright claim, there are two possibilities. First, autocratic governments use digital methods of repression and these silence dissenting voices. In that case, digital repressions replace old strategies. Second, using new technology to identify dissidents and, consequently, triggers high-intensity or traditional methods of repression. In that case, new technology complements existing methods to silence critics (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor and Wright, 2020; Gohdes, 2020; Roberts, 2018).

I sustain that both possibilities apply to the case of Cambodia. As I have shown in the last part, most informants distrusted social media because of their moral panics; they could be harassed or arrested should they speak against the Government. Being aware that they could be monitored online limited their people's access to opposition forces, shrank their social networks, and made them censor most of their political views in public. Put differently, low-intensity actions in the digital sphere were enough to deter dissenting voices. However, not all respondents were afraid enough to censor their views.

Below, I use the case of three informants: (r3.01), a young male with higher education, interested in politics; (r3.27), a human rights activist; (r3.21), and the spokesperson of an NGO. These cases are enlightening since they offer an insider's view of the crackdown from the angle of civil society and demonstrate the hybridisation of political fear, which is underexplored in the literature. Moreover, this variety of examples also show that the new wave of fear and repression reached people with different profiles.

Their examples show that, in some cases, digital media helped state authorities identify dissenting voices and employ high-intensity measures. So, the culture of fear was hybridised. It incorporated digital means to meet its aims without excluding analogue techniques. Authorities used digital media to obtain information about dissidents – track their digital activity and hack their e-mail and social media accounts – and traditional (or analogue) methods to crackdown dissenting politics.

I also show that the ruling party's actions to silence the loudest dissenting voices happened in two stages involving online and offline spheres. First, identification. State authorities used digital user traces to monitor individuals and organisations perceived as threatening the regime's stability. That way, state authorities could watch what they did on social media and/or hack their accounts to obtain personal information about them to follow their political activist. The second phase was offline harassment. For example, journalists received threats (r2.17), citizens were arrested with little legal foundation over Facebook posts (Human Rights Watch, 2021), and NGO workers were being followed to induce fear and silence them (r3.21). Finally, it is also important to mention that the news of many cases of harassment propagated rapidly through social media, inducing fear among citizens who had never been harassed. That helped the ruling party retain its political power because many of them silenced their views. Thus, the hegemony of the CPP was not jeopardised.

Case 1: (r3.01), an ordinary citizen harassed due to his political actions

(r3.01) is a young citizen with a university degree, full-time job, and he was passionate about politics. He was a member of an opposition political party. He created an informal working group with colleagues to discuss Cambodia's political developments and, occasionally, share their views with well-established local activists and community leaders. Given the cases of repression in the mid-2010s, they used social media – mainly Facebook – to do most of their activity and avoid face-to-face interactions with well-known dissenting voices that could put them in the spotlight of the ruling party. Thanks to social media, (r3.01) and his team could voice their views on the latest political

developments in the country in the 2010s. However, SNS exposed (r3.01), threatening him and his family.

> When I am not there [home], they [police officers] are looking for my family… because they know they are afraid. They tell them that if their son is involved in politics, then he should stop it because he can create a revolution, and the Government does not like that. But I am not afraid […]. My family does not like it, then they call me, and they cry. They are concerned. Every three or four months, they come to my house and drink water with my parents. They never come to find me, only my parents. But I am not afraid. (r3.01)

Researcher: Do they go to your family because you belong to a party or because of your informal group?

(r3.01):   I post about my party, so they know I belong to a party, and this is a threat. They don't like my shares [on SNS]. They don't know what else I am doing behind the scenes.

Researcher: Is this [form of intimidation] a common practice?

(r3.01):   My activist friends do similar things, and some important people have been charged. They also know how to hack accounts.

Researcher: Are people being threatened? Any violent action?

(r3.01):   No violence. But police officers talk to them directly. They say that they are making a revolution against the Government, and they must sign a paper saying they won't do it again. They can be in jail for 24 hours as a punishment.

Researcher: It is mostly verbal intimidation, I understand.

(r3.01):   Yes. But if you do serious, they can create a corruption case against you to make sure you are arrested. A political prisoner.

That part of the conversation shows two vital issues. First, new technology was a crucial tool for members of civil society to practice politics. Digital media gave (r3.01) access to information and a network of people. Second, regardless of all the opportunities, the internet could quickly put those who discussed politics – especially those who were not aligned with the view of the CPP – under the radar of the state authorities. He faced "passive" harassment since police officers always wanted to meet and intimidate his parents instead of him, probably due to generational differences in

experiences of authoritarianism. As I have argued, young citizens with higher education and better critical thinking skills like (r3.01) are less likely to get scared or, at least, have more tools to evaluate their fear and potential consequences of their actions. So, given that older citizens are more likely to have first-hand experiences with fear, it was not a coincidence that police officers were looking for his (r3.01) parents, who were older and more vulnerable. (r3.01)'s case also shows that digital repression facilitated analogue or traditional repression – even if his case was mild compared to other cases of arrests.

Case 2: (r3.27), a human rights activist with a strong digital presence

(r3.27) is a human rights activist who relied on social media to let "people know what happens in Cambodia" (r3.27) and break the culture of political silence in the country. He mostly did so with his online audio-visual materials to accuse the ruling party of violating liberal democracy and human rights principles. On the flip side, just like (r3.01), his online advocacy also publicised his activism. As a result, the ruling party targeted him, and he was harassed offline and online.

> Now I am very strong and popular in social media. I use it for advocacy…but with the Government's crackdown, all my social media accounts are hacked. In the context of the 2017 elections, they arrested me when I was live streaming; the army arrested me and [*name of his collaborator*], so they could have my material [from his phone], but I still keep it because I gave it all to [*name of his collaborator*] and he runs away […]. People like me, who work for [human] rights, are facing problems… from court, authorities, the Government, but we do it because for the next generation […]. But three things can happen: killing [sic], prison, run away. (r3.27)

Regarding online harassment, (r3.27) explained that some of his social media accounts had been hacked multiple times by pro-Government agents. The aim was to discredit him online with fabricated cases of sexual harassment, for example, to undermine his image and silence him. He said that "they can hack my accounts because of the phone number, which is controlled by the government. When I create an email account, I need a phone number to confirm, then they know the phone number, and they can hack my account, the company send the code to the phone number, and the government controls the phone number (r3.27). Still, having his accounts hacked was not the only consequence he had to face, and he was physically harassed too. "I use multimedia to educate, to advocate for human and land rights in Cambodia. The authorities always threatened me, they have arrested me so they

can stop me" (r3.27). He considered these actions as attempts to silence his political and human rights activism.

Like (r3.01), the case of (r3.27) shows that digital media are a double-edged sword. It facilitates the task of activists, but they are also put in the spotlight of the ruling party, making digital repression a complement of analogue repression when state authorities benefit from the net to identify dissenting voices and harass them offline.

Case 3: (r3.21), offline surveillance of an NGO worker

(r3.21) represents an organisation that worked to promote good governance and strengthen civil society's accountability. Like other institutions, digital tools and media helped (r3.21) organisations operate more efficiently, disseminate information, and target and reach more people more quickly. However, using the internet also created a threat to his organisation's security and its staff. (r3.21)'s main concern was that the ruling party had enough digital capacity to monitor internal communications. In other terms, he was concerned about digital surveillance. As far as he knew, his online activity had never been surveyed, but some of his colleagues had had their social media accounts hacked, apparently by the authorities.

> Some members of [name of his organisation] are being monitored on Facebook. They have also been hacked, and their e-mails have been read by the system [Government-affiliated accounts]. Some people informed us that some of our WhatsApp messages had been monitored by the [Government] intelligence unit (r3.21).

His concerns were not without foundation. Since the ruling party began putting pressure on liberties, people's privacy rights suffered a sharp decrease. Since 2015, the Telecommunications Law has permitted authorities to monitor private communications without judicial oversight (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In 2018, the Government adopted the Inter-Ministerial Prakas[39] on Website and Social Media Control. It required all internet providers to install surveillance software to monitor the digital content on the web. Moreover, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications would block any content on the net that would threaten Cambodia's national security (ibid). Also, in 2018, the state-owned Telecom-Cambodia created the Data Management Centre (DMC) to filter all domestic and international internet traffic (Mech, 2018). In 2020, the third draft of the cybercrime bill was leaked,

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[39] Declaration.

which would give authorities even more power to monitor people's digital interactions and, as I noted in section 5.2.1, in February 2021, the National Internet Gateway came into effect.

> Prime Minister Hun Sen signed the sub-decree on the Establishment of the National Internet Gateway. The sub-decree requires all internet traffic in Cambodia to be routed through a regulatory body charged with monitoring online activity before it reaches users. It would allow for "blocking and disconnecting [of] all network connections that affect safety, national revenue, social order, dignity, culture, tradition and customs." The grounds for action are both overbroad and not defined, permitting arbitrary and abusive application of blocking and disconnecting powers" (Human Rights Watch, 2021)

These measures are counterproductive for civil society because they restrict people's digital experiences, which become more limited and subject to governmental scrutiny (Hunt, 2018), creating a chilling effect that often translates into self-censorship (Human Rights Watch, 2021). One NGO worker (r3.21) also flagged one obvious and intrinsic fact about digital media. Everyone is part of a network because SNS connects multiple individuals, bringing together individuals from different networks. In many instances, this is an advantage for CSOs if they want to reach a larger audience. Still, it is also a problem because a security breach in the account of just one user might become a gateway to many other networks and users. Even if (r3.21) 's online activity had not been tracked, he said he had faced traditional, physical intimidation. More specifically, his family was the target.

> This year, my two houses have been monitored during three consecutive days by two guys… they were looking at someone, they were looking for me. During that time, I was in [*name of location*], but my wife and my children informed me that two guys wearing glasses and masks were riding a big moto, and they were around the house every day. This happens to other key leaders, so that's why some of them had to flee to other countries (r3.21).

Along with the two previous cases, the example of (r3.21) unveils that the digital activity of some citizens and CSOs translated into digital repression, which complemented physical harassment. Digital surveillance can meet different purposes. First, all three examples show that the Government can track people online to obtain personal information about netizens' political activism (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor and Wright, 2020). Put differently, the Government can use the internet to get specific and detailed information about dissenting voices – for example, the content of private conversations – to set particular targets. Second, digital surveillance is used to intimidate and induce fear, especially when surveillance happens in the non-digital world, and it is used with precision. For example, (r3.21)

said it was not a coincidence that those two people showed in his house when he was not in it. (r3.01) also said that the authorities knew when he was not home to talk to his parents.

The three cases I have presented above lead to two outcomes. First, digital tools and media in the hands of Cambodian state authorities are a tool for surveillance and repression. Overall, the internet improved civil society's public life in the first half of the 2010s, as I showed in Chapter 5. Still, platforms like Facebook have also exposed dissenting voices, especially activists and other actors, with loud political voices. Second, the governmental repression that resulted from the new wave of fear combines digital methods with analogue techniques. They meet different purposes and complement one another, showing that the online and offline spheres must be analysed together. So, regardless of the increasing relevance of the digital sphere, it can be hardly dissociated from the analogue sphere. As some studies (Castells (Ed), 2007; Harlow, 2012; Kurt Herold, 2014; Marlot, 2014) have demonstrated, the online and offline spheres rarely work independently in social and political contexts. Consequently, the online and offline spaces being complementary gives way to a hybrid sphere, "a conceptual space that exceeds the epistemological dualisms of online-offline" (Šimůnková, 2019: 67). So, in response to what connects the two spheres, I sustain that fear links them. The state sector uses fear and repression online and offline, and one reinforces the other. As Giroux notes (2015), surveillance is responsible for increasing political repression against dissenting voices in contexts of hybridity. Digital tools and media have facilitated this task with endless possibilities to use digital tools to monitor citizens, detect dissent, and repress targeted individuals and organisations. So, surveillance as a political tactic has entered a new dimension (Eck and Hatz, 2020), especially in authoritarian regimes like China, and the credit score system is one example (Wang, 2019).

Therefore, the cases outlined in this section are relevant because they provide a more accurate account of the link between the online and offline space in the context of political repression. The following section explores how that new context of fear impacted civil society and its members' adaptation.

6.2. Civil society's adaptation to the hybrid context

So far, in this chapter, I have shown that the crackdown that followed the digitalisation of the state sector resulted in a new wave of fear that combined elements of the online and offline spheres to limit people's political voices. The new wave of hybrid fear was felt across a diversity of civil society groups, such as citizens, activists, and journalists, as the cases of several informants with different

backgrounds have shown. This section explores how civil society adapted to the new hybrid configuration of the public sphere. I contend that the crackdown limited civil society's opportunities to form publics and integrate themselves in the public sphere. Still, civil society has been able to use digital media to generate new strategies to adapt itself to a less interactive and integrative hybrid public sphere, creating smaller networks to build trust. Overall, I show how the state sector's digitalisation and the crackdown harmed much of the democratic progress made in the digital era.

Before I can explain civil society's strategies, I outline two challenges that civil society faced in the context of hybrid fear. These challenges were the contraction of the public sphere due to people's lower capacity to interact with other actors and the reduced integrative function of the public sphere. Highlighting these challenges is necessary because the public sphere mirrors the health of civil society. It reflects the social and political diversities within it, and it represents the interests of different publics so they can engage in politics (Robinson and Tannenberg, 2019). Then, I focus on microtargeting and creating smaller citizen networks to adapt to the new political context.

6.2.1. Publics in jeopardy

The first challenge that civil society faced was that people's capacity to form publics decreased, primarily because citizens and CSO's opportunities to interact with each other were reduced since the crackdown was initiate in the mid-2010s. Through the lens of democracy, that matters because "it is imperative not to lose sight of the classic idea that democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talks with each other. That is certainly the basic premise of those versions of democratic theory that see deliberation as fundamental" (Dahlgren, 2005, p.149). With these words, Dahlgren highlights the interactional dimension as a crucial function of the public sphere to form publics and, more importantly, to generate public opinions (Habermas, 1989). Moreover, since multiple publics are formed, the public sphere facilitates the interaction between members and thickens democracy. Publics interact with counter-publics, "a scene in which a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and, in doing so, finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group but also with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public" (Warner, 2002, p.80).

People's political isolation and self-censorship – elements of the culture of fear that I have examined in the second section of this chapter – are two reasons that explain why civil society's capacity to forms publics and counter-publics decreased. First, people's distrust towards fellow citizens harmed their networks and chances of interaction with opposing political forces, resulting in people being

politically isolated. For example, earlier in the chapter, I mentioned that outlets like the Cambodia Daily had to shut down, that the CNRP was dissolved, and that several activists and journalists who criticised the ruling party fled the country because they feared facing reprisals (r3.17) (CCIM, 2018; Chhor, 2018; Say, 2017). These cases damaged the public sphere because several politically independent actors could not reach out to other civil society actors and help them form publics (r3.14), a vital element in healthy democracies. After all, the formation of publics is an essential characteristic of healthy democracies since they enable the construction of public opinion so civil society members can echo their political voices (r1.06; r3.14). An NGO worker noted that citizens struggled to voice their concerns and fight for their rights.

> If you are a simple person, you cannot have dialogue, and you cannot express your feelings without independent media outlets. Before the crackdown, independent newspapers like Cambodia Daily engaged a lot of people, especially the voiceless people or community people affected by land concession… they can engage through independent media, but if there are no independent media, they cannot use their freedoms. While the political situation is bad like this, especially the CSOs, they work with the people, and they have a lot of information to release to the public and government, but when there are threats and accusations, most people keep themselves quiet and do not engage with us. We invite them to talk to use, but they reject (r3.12).

(r3.12)'s views reflect that people's political fear of being harassed weakened citizen networks. So, many civil society actors struggled to form publics to participate in the public sphere. (r3.12) also pointed out that "people keep themselves quiet" (r3.12). In other words, referring to people's self-censorship. As I explained in section 6.1.2, some citizens stopped sharing their political views. In contrast, others chose to adapt their narratives to avoid a confrontation or an argument with people with different political views. That further impacted the public's quality since citizens might not express their political views when talking with fellow citizens.

However, self-censorship changed the dynamics of the publics rather than preventing their creation. Even if many informants said they were beholding their political views, they also said they were more likely to share them in small groups of people in the private sphere "outside the legitimate bounds of the government coercion and regulation" (Mnookin, 1982, p.1429). On the one hand, the private sphere ensured public opinion to be formed since people felt safer sharing their views there. However, on the other hand, people's preference for the private sphere made them less likely to interact with people outside their networks (r2.06; r2.13; r2.14; r2.18; r3.18; r3.19). It is also important to highlight that respondents might not share their political views even in the private sphere (r2.06). For instance,

a young informant said that when her family speaks about politics, "I listen, but I do not talk" (r2.06) due to the family hierarchies at play. For example, she said that questioning senior members' political views in her family was inappropriate.

Regardless of the limitation of the private sphere to generate public opinion that can transcend to broader publics, its importance cannot be overlooked. First, it provided a safe atmosphere so people could host political discussions. Second, most civic engagement actions begin in the private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010) because it is usually freer from governmental intromission. So, individuals search for spheres of sub-political issues representing their civil priorities, which might then be broadcasted in the public sphere (ibid).

To sum up, the crackdown reduced the public's size and made people more reliant on the private sphere to generate public opinion. The private sphere can ensure people's privacy to form publics, exchange ideas, and create public opinion, contributing to a thick and substantive type of democracy. However, people's views are more valuable when shared publicly and confronted by counter-publics in the public sphere. In Cambodia, people's political isolation and self-censorship resulting from the governmental crackdown on political freedoms jeopardised people's willingness to make their political stands public – regardless of the opportunity that new technology offered. Political fear confined people to the private sphere and limited their interaction with other publics and CSOs outside their network. Below, I examine how this damaged the integrative dimension of the public.

6.2.2. Lack of integration in the public sphere

The second challenge civil society encountered after the political crackdown of 2017 was its poor integration in governance actions. The integrative function of the public sphere is to consolidate is to allow members of the civil society to influence governmental policies and shape collective institutions, consolidating the active role of citizens in governance and upholding the unity of the polity (Trenz, 2009). The integrative function denotes a strong relationship between civil society and the state sector. As I have shown in Chapter 5, a healthy relationship between these two spheres is guided by integrating civil society in governance to ensure that the voices of its members are not excluded from the processes to take collective action and the system of governance they are part of (Colletta and Cullen, 2000; Müller, 2006). Integration assumes the role of an "arena of cultural creativity and reproduction in which society is imagined and thereby made real and shaped by the ways in which it is understood" (Calhoun, 2003 in Trenz, 2009, p.38). According to Müller's (Müller, 2006) framework,

participation, legitimacy, and protection are the other three elements that define the link between civil society and the state. Here, I show that Müller's four elements are firmly interdependent to indicate civil society's lack of integration in the public sphere, reinforcing the power gap with the state sector.

Overall, citizens and CSOs reported civil society's weak integration in the public sphere. That was essentially due to a thick boundary with the political and powerful classes that exacerbated the power gap between civil society and the state sector. According to CSO spokespeople, that boundary challenged people's integration in the public sphere because people "believe that only politicians can make change" (r3.14). The views of everyday citizens were like those of CSOs. Many citizens did not think they were relevant in the public sphere and politics. Informants like (r2.09) said that "I think it doesn't matter if I'm interested or not interested. The problem is that I feel that I don't get anything back from politics, personally" (r2.09). Moreover, she was concerned that those well-connected to the political class "use connections" (r2.09) to obtain political benefits. (r2.09) was not the only citizen who shared this view. Other informants, such as (r2.06), made the Government responsible for people's lack of integration. She said that "the Government is too powerful and cares about the rich people […]" and that the Government "should give a chance to other people to control the country […]" (r2.06). In other words, these respondents complained about a corrupted system that empowered those well-connected to the political classes and undermined the chances of other civil society members to influence the decision-making mechanisms.

However, not all informants expressed similar degrees of disaggregation from the public sphere. Some CSOs explained that the nature of their job entailed cooperating with the state sector, thus forging strong links between the board members of organisations and state authorities. However, one problem that the spokesperson of one of these CSOs identified was that those well connected to the political class rarely work at a grassroots level (r3.03), thus making people's integration in governance difficult.

> The people we work the most with are think tanks and other organisations […]. So, these institutions are very well connected. We have very few partners who work at the grassroots level, so it's very difficult for us to know what is going on. When we meet with partners, they are facing very different issues compared to the rest of the population (r3.03).

The thick boundary between some civil society sectors and the political class reflects a lack of "popular inclusion" (Ferree, Gamson and Rucht, 2002, p.296) that does not ensure people's participation in

activities of deliberation and other opinion-making actions. In the participatory liberal tradition, "participation of these grassroots actors should be continuous – not simply something that occurs periodically during election campaigns or only at the beginning of the decision process" (ibid). This way, people are politically empowered to challenge inequalities and act on their interests. Still, that did not happen in the post-crackdown years. Hybrid fear eroded people's political engagement, especially non-traditional participation, and, consequently, their integration in the public sphere. As a citizen indicated, he used to take part in demonstrations and political debates before the crackdown. Still, after the governmental pressure on people's political liberties increased, he only voted in elections. As he said, "people are worried that, if they [engage in politics], it can be harmful…" (r2.17). Nonetheless, he said that if peaceful demonstrations could be ensured, many citizens would join them. So, even if some citizens were willing to participate more in non-traditional politics, fear prevented them from doing so, damaging popular inclusion.

(r3.14), a grassroots leader admitted that participation beyond voting was in crisis under the current political environment, even if several organisations have devoted significant efforts in feeding a culture of participation.

> In the events that we have in Phnom Penh, we cannot address the structural problems of Cambodia, but we want to create a model, we want to expand the space to create a culture of participation from the citizens while the government tries to intimidate and shrink civil space and people participation, so it's important that we keep informed, discussion with public and engage people to participate and speak what we cannot speak. Our mission is to promote the culture of participation, human rights, and democracy among citizens (r3.14).

The culture of participation that (r3.14) named is critical to generate opportunities to legitimise state authority (Müller, 2006) and maintain that the existing governance mechanisms are appropriate to meet the desired social and political goals (Lipset, 1959). As I argued in the previous part, the new wave of political fear challenged the formation of publics, which affected people's political participation and, consequently, their opportunity to legitimate state authority. Still, legitimisation through elections remained. Elections have been celebrated since 1993, and voter turnout even after the crackdown was over 80% (McCargo, 2018). However, the political isolation of civil society agents challenges the fairness of this process since opportunities for opposing forces to remain competitive decreased. What this means is that, after the crackdown, only procedural legitimacy existed – the type of legitimacy that prioritises the decisions that are reached through democratic processes such as elections – at the expense of substantive legitimacy, which emphasises the process that creates

legitimacy, such as the formation of publics that result in deliberation (Enoch, 2015; Fabienne, 2017; Brownsword and Goodwin, 2012). Since individuals have fewer opportunities to form publics and apply a moral filter to the political situation, legitimacy achieved through elections becomes flawed. One respondent (r2.10) showed how voting after the crackdown became less meaningful due to the limited plurality of political options.

> I am not interested in any party because the party I used to like does not exist anymore. Now I need to force myself to vote for the parties I dislike (r2.10). I am afraid that officers can investigate my vote. That is why I feel forced to vote for a concrete party […] (r2.10). I think that I have an important role because if I choose the wrong party, I will face negative consequences. But I do not vote, or I take no action, this is also wrong. If I choose the wrong party, it's bad for me, and if I do nothing or I do not vote, it is also bad for me and I feel guilty (r2.10).

So, popular inclusion after the crackdown was limited to electoral democracy. Therefore, people's opportunities to legitimate the CPP rule were limited to voting in elections that, according to informants like (r2.10), were flawed because only the ruling party had real options to win the elections since there were no solid political opposition forces. All these factors explain civil society's poor integration in the public sphere and their limited capacity to act on their interests, reinforcing the power gap with the Government. Balance of power is a concept that is widely used in international relations and discusses power distribution between states (Haas, 1953). However, it can also apply to examine the intrinsic link between people and state because "an enlargement of the role of the state may occur at the expense of civil society, and the enhancement of civil society usually requires a rolling back of at least some of the functions and powers of the state. The fortunes of the two concepts must therefore be examined in conjunction with one another" (Atkinson, 1992: 1). The consequence of this imbalance of power was a negative relationship between civil society and state, thus weakening the role of civil society in the public sphere. As I mentioned above, the imbalance of power is an issue that existed before the democratic transition (r3.11). "The ruling party has built their power based on very communal structure. You have very strong communist-run Council since the 1980s who still the chief running in the past" (r3.26). Therefore, the imbalance of power that I describe is an old structural problem that, more recently, was revived with the digitalisation of the state sector and the crackdown that followed.

6.2.3. Microtargeting and the creation of small citizen networks

In the previous part, I identified civil society's difficulties forming publics, generating public opinion, and contributing to the public sphere due to the political crackdown. Nonetheless, members of civil society were able to use digital media to develop new strategies to adapt to the new political landscape and minimise the crackdown's impact. According to some informants (r1.06; r3.14; r3.21; r3.09; r3.28; r3.26) who worked closely with citizens at a grassroots level, the underlying problem undermining the quality of democratic governance is people's lack of social and political trust. Many citizens found it hard to trust other citizens and their political institutions. According to a political analyst (r1.06), people's lack of trust is harmful because it does not allow members of civil society to interact with each other, weakening the public sphere. People lack faith in the Government and among citizens themselves because "the system is not built on the rule of law" (r1.06). According to the spokespeople of CSOs (r1.06; r.3.21), fixing distrust should be a national priority. New technology has an outstanding role in achieving it, even if the internet is precisely one of the primary causes of distrust among citizens.

Here, I show that civil society agents benefited from digital media to develop two strategies to overcome lack of trust. First, CSOs and citizens used the digital sphere to identify the specific members of civil society they wanted to interact with. Second, people used digital media to develop small citizen networks that often resulted in new relationships based on trust – or reinforced existing ones – overcoming the limited opportunities to form publics and generate public opinion. These two strategies were possible partly due to new technology, which helped people strengthen their role in the public sphere. Still, regardless of the importance of digital media, the analogue sphere remained vital since digital technology helped people engaging in offline interactions. Thanks to these strategies, civil society showed hints of adaption to a new political context characterised by the ruling party's dominance in the public sphere.

Thanks to digital tools and media, several CSOs could identify and select the public they wanted to reach instead of disseminating generic messages that only an undetermined number of people will receive (r3.15). As a think tank representative explained, digital tools and media helped CSOs develop "micro intervention; small intervention that is not costly but can grow up and make an impact in the city" (r3.09). For example, new technology allowed (r3.09)'s organisation to select the participants in their programs carefully to increase efficacy. A few months before our conversation, his organisation picked a group of young middle-class citizens with a higher education diploma. Using new technology made recruitment highly effective and efficient. His organisation could choose a group of citizens

capable of forming more robust citizen networks that would translate into higher social impact. Those young citizens were flexible enough to approach citizens from higher classes and the most disadvantaged social groups. Other organisations also used new technology to microtarget their audiences, increasing their efficiency and effectiveness in developing networks with other civil society members. The spokesperson of an organisation working in public policy (r3.11) explained why digital media had been beneficial.

> Before, we had traditional approaches like face to face, but now [digital media] changed our strategy. Our new strategy is focusing on online tools to promote our work. We do not change the aim of our work to make people interact with the government or fight for their rights, but we changed the way we do it. We combine traditional face to face with online tools. People can engage about issues in communities on SNS, Facebook… we do educational tools on social media and Facebook to make the public more aware […]. We change the target from old people from fishery communities to the youth at schools, university who engage and monitor in the public engage monitoring the public service delivery (r3.11).

In a context where many citizens did not trust digital media to engage in politics, the examples above show how CSOs used new technology to keep social networks afloat and build new ones. They could identify people who could be part of them, increasing the effectiveness of their actions. Still, the offline sphere remained crucial since most interactions were analogue. That strategy was not unique to CSO. Citizens also benefited from digital media to microtarget like-minded citizens and interacted with them. A young citizen (r2.04) said that Facebook made meeting citizens with similar interests easier, such as people supporting the same political party. Moreover, social media allows citizens to find specific organisations or events that match their interests. As I pointed out in section 6.1.2, I presented the case of one informant (r3.24) who was part of a CSO arranging political gatherings; she indicated that Facebook was helpful to find other people who were genuinely interested in their events so they could join their discussions.

From the lens of fear, new technology was critical to restrain the new wave of fear and improve the interactive function of the public sphere. Civil society's use of digital media contained two factors in the new wave of fear: poor networks between members of civil society and their political isolation – two of the elements of the culture of fear (Alves, 1990). Citizens and CSOs micro-targeted specific publics and consolidated citizen networks that resulted in several activities in the offline sphere, reducing some people's political isolation.

As I explained earlier, creating citizen networks and containing their political isolation was crucial to address their lack of social trust – an issue that some CSOs (r1.06) identified as a fundamental problem in the post-crackdown era. (r1.06) said that, to build trust, citizens need

> a regular meet-up, catch-up, like Politikoffee[40]; you can meet there every week to discuss informally, make plans, sport… this is trust […]. It happens on and offline. You can find like-minded people using digital tools. When I tweet, I share… my message attracts like-minded people so that I can make several friends, but I don't trust them. Then I check their profile and chat with them, then we have an appointment, we play sport, we drink coffee… then trust has been established (r1.06).

The observation that (r1.06) did is meaningful in two ways. First, it reinforces the idea that digital media and social media platforms like Facebook can act as catalysts that enable the trust-building process. They facilitate citizens meeting like-minded people and expanding citizen networks. That happened to (r1.06) himself. As a political analyst, he had used digital media to meet journalists, activists, or researchers in the Southeast Asian region. However, he insisted that, at first, he would never talk about politics. Instead, he would speak about topics that are perceived as safer, like culture or even sports.

Second, his view highlights that the most meaningful stage in the trust-building process usually happens face-to-face. Hence, the importance of considering the offline sphere when analysing digital democracy and vice versa. Using his example, (r1.06) explained that he used social media to create citizen networks, primarily for young people. Their members initiated their relationship by sharing their profiles, interests, and other personal information using the online sphere. They started a relationship based on trust with an online dialogue. Then, when citizens would meet face to face, they would talk about more personal issues like their studies, life goals and, sometimes, politics. "This [trust-building process] is slow, but that is the way… the stepping-stone and the foundation to build trust" (r1.06).

However, new technology did not only prove to be helpful to build trust. Digital media also allowed people to keep in touch with each other, thus maintaining the networks of trust they had created (r1.06; r3.03). As the spokesperson of a think tank explained (r3.03), when people use digital means of communication like instant messaging apps, their relationship becomes more casual, positively affecting trust creation. These trust-building processes are relevant because, as I observed earlier in this chapter, the post-crackdown period has been characterised by a lack of trust, damaging citizen

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[40] Politikoffee is the name of a group based in Phnom Penh arranging political forums.

networks. New technology helped some citizens and CSOs to build trust, partly overcome political fear and, more crucially, it strengthened the interactive function of the public sphere.

Interviews also revealed that digital tools improved people's integration in the public sphere. The masses, who were well-connected thanks to digital media, found protesting daily injustices was easier (r3.20). Still, that was to a limited extent since respondents did not protest high-profile cases. Instead, they complained about minor issues that directly related to political topics. A famous case involved Prime Minister Hun Sen. He was involved in a mediatic case when he violated the traffic law circulated on Facebook.

> During a trip on June 18 to Sre Ambil district in southwestern Cambodia's Koh Kong province, Hun Sen boarded a motorcycle taxi without putting on a helmet, according to a video clip posted on Facebook.
>
> He then asked the driver, who also did not wear a helmet, to sit behind him on the motorbike, which had no license plate. Several of Hun Sen's bodyguards followed behind them as the prime minister drove over a bridge (Tha, 2016, n.p).

Due to the pressure that was generated on social media, the PM apologised and drove to a police station to pay two fines for not wearing a helmet and driving a motorbike without a license plate – he also posted that on his social media (ibid). In this case, it was not a single individual who took the initiative but the masses. Hun Sen's case was an example of "crowdsourcing" (Bani, 2012) in democracy, where the task of one person – a state authority that should have fined him – was performed by the public in the form of an open call (Howe, 2008) through social media. New technology translated into ease of communication and available and searchable data that people used to put pressure on the Government to stay accountable for the actions of its members.

Regarding Hun Sen's case, an influencer (r3.20) commented that the motorbike case was not a high-profile case. Furthermore, the PM could use social media to flip the situation and show that he complied with the local laws when paying the fine for his committed infraction. Therefore, he made the most of Facebook to reinforce his image when other people were criticising him. Moreover, (r3.20) added that while that was a positive example of democratic crowdsourcing, most citizens are unlike to protest high-profile cases of corruption or human rights abuses. She said that

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with the power of social media, people were able to come together and try to protest against that, even though I wish people protested about something a bit more substantial than that. But you can see it made an impact. It affected the government to the point where they reconsidered that, and they changed the policy because of that, so I think that the voices on social media have gained more traction and power, and it can affect the traditional way of spreading messages (r3.20).

Interviews with ordinary citizens revealed that talking about "something a bit more substantial" (r3.20) meant talking about politically sensitive issues. Still, that was unlikely among the people in my research sample. Using digital media to discuss sensitive or high-profile political issues publicly was something my informants did not feel comfortable with. Nonetheless, complaining about social matters mainly was regarded as an acceptable practice. As one citizen said, in the end, "it depends on what type of problem. For example, a social problem like a broken road, then I am okay to complain about it and share it… but if it's a political problem, then it's not okay" (r2.18), said one of them. Informants perceived posting about politically sensitive topics as something dangerous. "If you post about bad things about the Government, it's not safe for you, but if you post [a social issue] you want to improve, then it's good" (r2.08), said one other citizen.

CSOs further indicated that those criticising the ruling party on social media were more likely to face reprisals. The spokespeople of an NGO said that "don't worry, you will be recognised soon enough [if you complain about political issues]. You can start without interference, do it from time to time, but you will be targeted" (r3.12). This situation contrasted with 2013, when people were more open to reporting social and political issues on the net (r2.13). However, some people found ways to express their political discontent, such as memes. Even if using memes was only mentioned by one informant, it has become a popular way to convey complex ideas through the internet. Memes and hashtags are artefacts of the digital age that transfer culture. They "activate inherent biases in a culture or society, sometimes replacing logical approaches to persuasive argument" (Beskow, Kumar and Carley, 2020, p.1). A journalist explained that

About politics, here, now, after 2017, they need to be more creative to speak safely (r3.02). Trolls, memes… for people who do not want to confront them directly, if they want to make fun of their speeches […]. They find other ways; you cannot criticise directly, but you can find other forms. They are scared, but the desire to criticise is still there (r3.02).

So, some citizens found alternative and subtle ways to criticise the ruling party. The second way people could become better integrated into the public sphere was through grassroots leaders (r3.21).

Informants were more likely to use CSO as intermediaries than exposing themselves to be identified as dissenting voices – something that is coherent with the previous examples of citizens not willing to complain about political issues. The CSO spokespeople who were in a position of strength to lobby the Government said that they often acted as intermediaries by "bring[ing] the message from the online, and we say this is the message that we got online for you [the state authorities], and we bring it to key stakeholders" (r3.18). Therefore, this process strengthens democratic, sustainable development. It engages people in politics, generates governmental accountability, and, overall, enhances people's feel they are more capable of influencing the Government, so it is more accountable to their needs (r3.21). However, it is worth noting that CSOs were equally concerned about putting themselves in the Government's spotlight (ibid).

The two strategies that I have outlined, microtargeting and creating smaller citizen networks based on trust, highlight that the online and offline spheres complement each other in this trust-building process. More specifically, new technology complements action in the analogue sphere. An NGO spokesperson said that

> if you want a demonstration, online communication is the most effective that can bring the offline activity, but, again, you need trust for this. If you want to make a movement against something, you need to use both systems, but in-between, you need leaders that can be trusted to facilitate the changes between online communication and offline communication (r3.21).

Trust must complement the use of online and offline methods. Otherwise, "digital and non-digital tools cannot make any difference" (r3.21). The views of another NGO worker – (r3.28) – complemented (r3.21) 's observations and pointed out that digital tools should be used in a way that allows people to have a better understanding of the offline world. That is why critical thinking is the most valuable tool because to make the most of digital media. As I showed in section 5.1.3, it enables people to better use information and, ultimately, make better decisions. "Smart political participation requires critical thinking [...]. The digital will not make you participate more in politics, but it will give you valuable information" (3.28).

6.3. Conclusion

The political crackdown orchestrated by the Government, which peaked in 2017 when the opposition party CNRP was dissolved, triggered a new wave of political fear in Cambodia that hindered civil society's political freedoms, negatively affecting trust and non-traditional online and offline political engagement. This statement answers the third secondary research question, "how does the digitalisation of the state sector impact members of Cambodia's civil society who were previously empowered through digital media?".

The new technology's role in the latest wave of fear differentiates it from fear in the past. The ruling party wisely used digital media to revive the culture of fear and increase preventive repression, attempting to silence dissenting voices prevent people's creation of networks and movements that could threaten its hegemony. These outcomes in this chapter lead to two conclusions. First, fear has remained a defining trait of Cambodia's political landscape that negatively affects non-traditional political participation. In the previous chapter, I showed that some members of civil society benefited from digital media to alleviate their political fear. Still, regardless of the democratic progress made in the first half of the 2010s, the ruling party embraced new technology to revive political fear and reverse the democratic gains that civil society had achieved some years earlier, extending its political dominance. The ruling party took advantage of the fact that political fear is well-embedded among many citizens – due to the country's past experiences with conflict and authoritarianism – to ensure its political dominance despite the popularisation of new technology.

Second, the digitalisation of the state sector and the resulting wave of political fear harmed non-traditional political participation. Still, electoral democracy remained strong. Including non-traditional forms of engagement to assess the impact of new technology in politics is necessary to avoid a minimalistic or thin approach to political participation and democracy that only considers voter turnouts to evaluate political engagement. On the one hand, the Cambodia case shows that the latest wave of fear did not negatively impact electoral democracy, which remained highly popular among informants and other citizens, as the voter turnout in the 2018 general elections shows. These results support the claim that survivors or traumatising experiences who live in fear are more likely to participate in electoral politics (Bali, 2007; Rose, Murphy and Abrahms, 2007). On the other hand, the latest wave of fear harmed non-traditional political engagement. Several informants showed their difficulties to benefit fully from the interactive and integrative functions of the public sphere, which made it difficult for them to participate in public political forums or the activities organised by civil society organisations working at a grassroots level directly with people.

Considering these outcomes and those in Chapter 5, where I claimed that civil society engagement in non-traditional politics lacked until the popularisation of digital democracy, I argue that fearful societies are indeed less likely to engage in non-traditional forms of political participation – as the pre-digital era and the post-crackdown years in Cambodia show, as other studies claim (Dammert, 2012; Vasilopoulos, 2018). Nonetheless, I incorporate the role of new technology to offer a more detailed view of this argument. I sustain that digital media is an effective mechanism to ease – not eliminate – people's fear and strengthen non-traditional political participation *as long as* the digital sphere is free and not co-opted by a dominant actor, such as an authoritarian government. The case of Cambodia shows that before the ruling party co-opted the digital sphere, new technology was vital in making people feel less scared and more trustful to participate in political demonstrations or engage in political deliberations. However, after the political crackdown of 2017 and the government co-optation of the digital sphere, members of the civil society engaged less in non-traditional politics, minimising the possibilities to use new technology to thicken participation.

Regarding trust and participation, I have shown that many informants did not trust fellow citizens or the state sector due to the new wave of fear. Nonetheless, electoral democracy remained highly popular, contradicting studies claiming that trust is necessary for people to engage in politics (Norris, 2011; Nye, 1997). However, this claim refers only to electoral democracy. Regarding non-traditional participation, people's distrust towards the Government and their fellow citizens harmed non-traditional participation. Many informants felt unsafe sharing and expressing their political views in public or the digital sphere because they were afraid of being seen as dissenting voices, harming non-traditional participation. This shows that trust is crucial to engaging in non-traditional politics, unlike other studies have claimed (Goldfinch, Gauld and Herbison, 2009; Eder and Katsanidou, 2014), primarily because when actions of non-traditional engagement are performed in public or the net, people feel more exposed and fear being targeted by the Government.

Most informants did not trust the digital sphere after the crackdown. Still, that does not rule out new technology to participate in politics. In the post-crackdown era, several people and organisations have used digital media to build trust and facilitate people's participation in dialogues or political gatherings, which often take place in the offline sphere. Hence, the importance of including the online and offline spheres in the analysis of digital democracy.

7. Conclusions

This thesis has set out to explore digital democracy – the use of digital media to practice politics – in Cambodia as a case of political illiberalism. Through the lens of everyday citizens and civil society organisations, the case of Cambodia demonstrates that new technology can influence how the culture of political fear operates in an illiberal regime, thus affecting the state of democracy. Digital media can ease civil society's political fear and strengthen non-traditional political participation to participate, for example, in public political forums or protests, or create and expand citizen networks. Still, the case of Cambodia also shows that the governmental apparatus has also been able to co-opt the digital sphere and perpetuate the culture of fear, outweighing the opportunities of digital democracy. That explains why, regardless of its many potential benefits, digital media's contribution to strengthening non-traditional political participation, making it difficult for substantive democracy to thrive and consolidate.

I outlined one primary research question to explore the intersection between new technology and political participation, "how has new technology influenced political participation in Cambodia in the digital era?". In answering this question, this thesis makes three contributions to scholarly literature. First, it presents political fear as an underexplored yet key element currently shaping Cambodia's political participation and the state of democracy in the digital era. Stressing the role of fear also highlights a relative lack of knowledge of the country-specific contextual elements that shape political participation, making it necessary to identify as many circumstantial elements as possible to understand the political scene since they determine how people engage in politics. The need to acknowledge the country-specific factors shaping the political scene also demonstrates that (digital) democracy is context-sensitive. In the case of Cambodia, I have shown that fear shattered undue optimism about the democratising potential of new technology, thus contributing to academic debates about the role of structural context (Moore, 1993 in Ruhl, 1996) and institutional arrangements (Di Palma, 1990 in Ruhl, 1996) to consolidate democratic governance in unfavourable contexts like illiberal regimes. While digital media has advanced democratic leadership in many regards, fear as one element of Cambodia's structural context has limited its opportunities. That also demonstrates that the opportunities and challenges of digital democracy do, indeed, coexist.

I proposed a qualitative approach to answer the main research question and address the relative lack of studies that bring up underexplored contextual elements to investigate digital democracy. Many studies on digital democracy in post-authoritarian and illiberal regimes use quantitative methods to explore the impact of new technology on political engagement (Saud and Margono, 2021; Sinpeng,

2021). However, qualitative research on new technology is relatively underrepresented. Using qualitative methods to obtain primary data allowed me to show an insider view of digital democracy from the lens of civil society. I used the stories of forty-three members of Cambodia's civil society to identify political fear as an underexplored and crucial political element to understand political participation in post-authoritarian and illiberal contexts. Concerning research about Cambodia, qualitative interviews with civil society representatives are precious because many citizens are becoming more reluctant to express their political views in front of others due to the increasing pressure of political liberties in the country, like other illiberal regimes like China (Carter and Carter, 2020) and Turkey (Yesil, 2014). Regardless of self-censorship being a challenge, I have shown that information can be obtained without exposing respondents and researchers to the extent that it becomes dangerous.

The second contribution of this thesis to academic literature is the incorporation of political fear in the intersection between new technology and political participation to understand further how digital media has changed political participation. Although some studies have done an excellent job analysing political involvement in the digital age (Guedoir, 2018; Kneuer and Datts, 2020; Morozov, 2011; van Dijk, 2012), fewer studies have incorporated the previously mentioned contextual elements that reshape the political involvement in the digital era illiberal regimes. Scholarship has also explored the link between fear and political participation (Beban, Schoenberger and Lamb, 2020; Brader and Marcus, 2013; Clouser, 2009). Still, studies researching fear, political involvement, *and fear* in the digital era are absent. Considering the role of political fear in cases of competitive authoritarianism like Cambodia is particularly relevant because fear might have been inherited from the past. This thesis has addressed this gap by investigating fear and political participation in the digital era. To do so, gaining historical context has been vital. Therefore, the study has included an overview of political fear before the internet's popularisation *and* also in the digital age. In both eras, fear presents a top-down structure and operates in the offline public sphere. In the digital era, the ruling party CPP has employed new technology to make inducing fear in the offline sphere more effective. Overall, the outcome has been undermined non-traditional political participation, challenging the consolidation of democratic governance and making Cambodia a competitive authoritarian regime.

With the analysis of the pre-digital era, I established that using political fear to undermine non-traditional political participation precedes the digital age. Therefore, fear is nowadays an old and well-embedded characteristic of Cambodia's political scene. In the colonial period and the decades that followed, political leaders instrumentalised fear to harass and prosecute political opponents. Attacking critical members of political opposition proved to scare people who, as a result, engaged

less in non-traditional politics. Since political elite members were relatively unchallenged, they could centralise abundant political power in their hands. In the democratic period of 1991, the ruling party CPP has kept political fear alive to become and remain politically dominant at the expense of other political parties and civil society. Deliberate attacks against civil society – like the coup of 1997 – and the prosecution of several activists and dissenting voices has furthered induced fear among the broader civil society. In the democratic era, traditional political participation has thrived – unlike non-traditional engagement. Therefore, the case of Cambodia endorses the thesis that fearful communities are less likely to engage in non-traditional politics (Ley Gutierrez, 2014; Pearce, 2007). People's engagement with non-traditional political actions was limited because they lacked access to independent political narratives, were politically isolated, and avoided expressing their political stands publicly. More importantly, many respondents feared putting themselves in danger should they challenge the ruling party's dominance. People's damaged non-traditional participation consolidated electoral democracy, giving way to a thin or procedural democratic system primarily designed to select political representatives and allowing the CPP to build a democratic façade at the expense of thick or substantive democracy.

The popularisation of digital media in the 2010s triggered a period of political optimism and democratic expansion due to people's increased political participation, followed by the political crackdown orchestrated by the ruling party, resulting in a democratic contraction. Regarding political participation, the arrival of digital democracy in Cambodia shows two things. First, new technology can ease the harmful effects of political fear and strengthen non-traditional political participation – provided that the state sector has not co-opted the digital sphere and people can use the internet freely. In the early 2010s, civil society instrumentalised digital media to connect with other citizens and organisations, become less politically isolated, and less afraid of expressing their political stands in public. Consequently, non-traditional engagement improved, complementing people's strong support for electoral democracy and moving closer to a thin-tick approach to democracy that combines substantive democracy to inform procedural democracy and strengthen the overall state of democracy in the country. Therefore, the first half of that decade showed the democratising capabilities of new technology, which can be instrumentalised to ease fear and improve non-traditional participation, building thicker democracy.

Second, digital media can also increase people's cost of involvement in politics, especially non-traditional forms of political engagement. In Cambodia, that happened *after* the CPP co-opted the digital sphere, triggering a new wave of repression and political fear. Welcoming new technology was the ruling party's retaliation to the earlier change in the power dynamics been the state sector and

civil society. To recognise fear and political participation in the internet era, understanding fear before the popularisation of the internet is essential since it complements fear in the analogue sphere. Currently, fear operates through a hybrid model that combines elements of the digital and analogue spheres, allowing the ruling party to gather information about dissenting voices, harassing them, and scare the masses. The CPP relies primarily on analogue fear to harass loud dissenting voices. First, high-profile cases like the assassination of Dr Kem Ley conveyed the message that expressing political views against the ruling party is dangerous. Second, the ruling party has also used verbal intimidation and has prosecuted activists and other dissenting voices and harassed everyday citizens who are known to support an opposition party. In both cases, respondents said that these examples of violence and harassment resulted in fear and diminished non-traditional political engagement. Therefore, the CPP primarily relies on using the analogue sphere to scare people who fear endorsing the ideas of opposition parties and even discussing their views in public.

New technology has not replaced the analogue sphere as the primary stage to induce fear in the digital era. Instead, online actions complement the offline sphere as the main stage for spreading political fear. Several secondary sources and experiences of numerous respondents showed that their online activity creates an opportunity for the ruling party to identify dissenting voices and monitor their online activity. More crucially, the government can use the information obtained from the online sphere to make offline harassment more effective. For example, some NGO representatives explained how their online activity is being monitored – their devices are even hacked – which facilitates their offline harassment, such as being physically followed or having their homes under surveillance, which triggers fear. Therefore, the popularisation of digital media has not radically changed the nature of political fear, which still operates primarily through harassment in the offline sphere. Nonetheless, fear is now more effective because of digital media.

Regardless of the revived culture of fear, many citizens and organisations used – and are still using – new technology to improve democracy. I have shown that some members of civil society use the internet to create and consolidate citizen networks based on trust, allowing them to address social and political issues and contributing to making democracy more substantive. However, the impact of these actions is relatively limited. Under the current situation, opportunities do not offset challenges, damaging non-traditional political engagement and not allowing democratic governance to consolidate despite new technology opportunities. That has damaged the participatory and integrative functions of the public sphere, tolling on non-traditional participation and making people less capable of shaping public institutions, although electoral politics remain robust.

The third contribution of this thesis to existing academic literature is a comprehensive analysis of digital democracy in Cambodia that includes the years of democratic expansion because of digital media – between 2010 and 2015, approximately – and the political crackdown and democratic contraction from 2015 onwards. Most literature on digital democracy addresses how new technology reshaped the political landscape before the political crackdown of 2017 (Bong and Sen, 2017; Hughes, 2013; Hughes and Eng, 2018; Phong, Srou and Sola, 2016; Soeung, 2013). Still, scholarly literature has yet to incorporate qualitative studies addressing how digital media affected people's political involvement considering the upheaval of 2013 *and* the political crackdown of 2017. Therefore, this study expands knowledge of digital democracy in Cambodia by examining the role of new technology framing the political crackdown of 2017 and the consequences it has had on political participation and the state of democracy.

7.1. Limitations of the study

This study has potential limitations within which its findings need to be interpreted carefully. As in most empirical studies, the research is limited by the measures used, which is why I acknowledge, at least, two methodological limitations. First, variety in the sample. The sample does not include informants representing the state sector – considering Cambodia's political landscape when I did fieldwork, that means no members of the ruling party CPP are part of the sample. As I explained in Chapter 4, I decided not to include members of the ruling party in the sample due to concerns about my safety during fieldwork after considering the climate of political fear that arose after the political crackdown of 2017. Several cases of harassment against some activists and human rights defenders addressing politically sensitive issues contribute to my choice of not approaching members of the ruling party. That is a limitation of the study because, as I have shown, most ruling party members have used new technology to develop their political tasks – something that has a significant influence on people's political lives and the way they use technology to participate in politics. Nonetheless, addressing members of the CPP is an opportunity for future research.

The sample also includes informants living in Phnom Penh only. That was a conscious choice due to limited resources to spend an extended period in rural areas. Many informants signalled remarkable differences between urban and rural environments. For example, the degree of political control in rural areas is usually higher. Furthermore, people's digital literacy and access to new technology tend to be more limited than in large urban hubs. Therefore, future research should consider these

differences and, if possible, include respondents living in rural areas to compare their views with those of urban citizens.

Second, the principle of generalisability hardly applies. Although the elements that I investigate in this thesis, such as political fear, lack of trust, digital media and political participation, are not unique to Cambodia, their meaning and importance are tightly linked to the contextual factors specific to each case study. Only with a good understanding of the country's social and political scene, we can give meaning to them. This thesis, thanks to qualitative methods, identifies political fear as a trait linked to the country's history that shaped political participation before the digital fear and during it, affecting democratic consolidation. However, the research outputs are not tested against the broader society to make claims that can be generalised to larger groups within the country, let alone in other countries. Therefore, the case of Cambodia does not represent all cases of digital democracy in illiberal and authoritarian regimes.

Transferability is a more appropriate principle to apply the findings of this study to similar case studies. Aspiring to make general claims about digital democracy that apply to all post-authoritarian or illiberal regimes is unrealistic – even if commonalities exist between cases. That is why I suggest transferring findings to use and compare this study's conclusions to the specifics of other environments. In this thesis, I have advanced scholarly literature incorporating fear and trust in the intersection between new technology and political participation to evaluate the state of democracy in Cambodia. I encourage incorporating political fear and trust in the analysis of digital democracy in other post-authoritarian and illiberal regimes. More importantly, since I am emphasising the principle of transferability, fear and trust should be contrasted with the contextual settings of each case study to investigate new dimensions of political fear and trust and how their intersection with digital democracy reassembles that of Cambodia.

7.2. Recommendations for future research

Considering the contribution of this thesis to the current literature and its limitations, I make three recommendations for future research to further the knowledge on digital democracy in Cambodia and beyond. First, it is necessary to conduct more qualitative studies to explore how different cohorts of people use new technology to practice politics. For example, this thesis has identified the culture of fear and distrust as common traits among the sample. Still, it has also explained that political fear numerous different informants with various backgrounds differently. Therefore, the need for more

qualitative research that investigates contrasts the unique features of digital democracy among social groups. The differences that the digital divide has created – as I showed in section 5.1.3 – like education or age demonstrate that digital democracy is highly subjective, being a good starting point to explore the differences between actors.

Second, future research would benefit from incorporating the views of the state sector, as long as involving Government participants is not too threatening to other participants in the study or researchers themselves. Incorporating the views of the state sector is necessary because, as I have shown in previous chapters, people's political engagement is tightly linked to the actions of the Government. Scholarly literature would benefit from using qualitative methods to incorporate the ruling party's views on digital democracy since that is missing in the current literature. As the opinions of some informants suggested, another way to expand knowledge about the state sector is to investigate whether the Cambodian Government receives technical assistance to develop and improve its digital skills – particularly from China. Extending knowledge in this direction could help understand the ruling party's digital skills and capabilities and how those could be used with political aims.

Third, digital democracy is a multidisciplinary field that allows people to engage in highly political issues like protecting the environment or empowering women. Hence, the need to explore how new technology influences these issues that most everyday citizens in the sample did not consider political. However, some influencers and some CSO representatives noted that even if many Cambodian people felt that talking about the environment or women's rights was not political, at least directly, social media could positively impact many of these issues.

Finally, digital democracy's scope goes beyond the digital sphere. As I have shown, actions in the online sphere often have implications in the analogue sphere. Regardless of the many opportunities associated with using new technology to practice politics, the offline political sphere remains vital to the political landscape. Since digital media and tools have not replaced analogue politics – they have complemented it – the study of digital democracy must include the online and offline spheres.

7.3. Concluding remarks

New technology offers civil society a valuable opportunity to engage in politics. Smartphones allow us to stay updated on the latest political developments instantly and uninterruptedly. Through multiple digital platforms like Facebook or Twitter, we can easily make our voices heard and echo our political stands. Moreover, we can interact with friends and strangers to discuss political issues – or any other topic – publicly or privately. All these digital media opportunities are hard to refute. However, digital democracy is *not* the panacea of political engagement. Using new technology to engage in politics comes with numerous drawbacks, like becoming exposed to the judgement of hundreds of thousands of people and leaving a digital trace. Some of these implications of using new technology can compromise our safety, especially in illiberal settings where political liberties cannot be taken for granted. Digital democracy opportunities and challenges coexist. Still, they mean different things in different places. In the United Kingdom, most people would presumably not be afraid to criticise the country's prime minister on social media. However, that might not be the case in Cambodia, where many people would self-censor their political views in front of others and, above all, in front of those outside their networks. I firmly believe that our role as academics is to offer a statement on digital democracy explaining, as objectively as possible, how different actors in different environments are using technology with political actions and, more importantly, the impact of their actions. This thesis has done so with the case of Cambodia. I have shown that digital media's impact on democracy has been limited due to the culture of fear. Only if we gather more knowledge on the effects of new technology on politics will the pertinent stakeholders be able to take action and use digital media in the best possible way to improve our societies.

Therefore, while studies like this thesis expand scholarly literature on digital democracy, the availability of this thesis should not be limited to academics and other readers interested in digital democracy. Through this research, I have encouraged a critical interpretation of digital democracy in post-authoritarian and illiberal regimes to give individuals, organisations, and policymakers a new tool to make a positive change happen. I hope that other academic and non-academic stakeholders will use these findings to take further action that results in meaningful impact in Cambodia or other political and social units, large or small. I will take the first step to make that happen. I committed to my respondents to share my thesis with them, which I will do as soon as possible.

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Appendix I: list of interviews

Code	Type	Gender (M=male; F=female)	Age	Education (Highest qualification)	Interview date
r1.01	Everyday citizen	M	25	Bachelor's degree	21 June 2019
r1.02	Everyday citizen	M	22	Secondary ed.	22 June 2019
r1.03	Everyday citizen	F	21	Secondary ed.	22 June 2019
r1.04	Everyday citizen	F	21	Secondary ed.	22 June 2019
r1.05	Political analyst	-	-	-	22 June 2019
r1.06	Political analyst	-	-	-	31 August 2019
r2.01	Everyday citizen	M	25	Bachelor's degree	28 June 2019
r2.02	Everyday citizen	F	26	Bachelor's degree	29 June 2019
r2.03	Everyday citizen	F	38	Bachelor's degree	4 July 2019
r2.04	Everyday citizen	M	37	Secondary ed.	6 July 2019
r2.05	Everyday citizen	F	21	Bachelor's degree	20 July 2019
r2.06	Everyday citizen	F	22	Bachelor's degree	20 July 2019
r2.07	Everyday citizen	M	43	Master's degree	21 July 2019
r2.08	Everyday citizen	F	26	Bachelor's degree	21 July 2019
r2.09	Everyday citizen	F	24	No diploma	23 July 2019
r2.10	Everyday citizen	F	54	No diploma	25 July 2019
r2.11	Everyday citizen	F	49	No diploma	27 July 2019
r2.12	Everyday citizen	M	39	No diploma	5 August 2019
r2.13	Everyday citizen	M	38	Bachelor's degree	8 August 2019
r2.14	Everyday citizen	M	26	No diploma	10 August 2019
r2.15	Everyday citizen	M	37	Bachelor's degree	15 August 2019
r2.16	Everyday citizen	F	33	No diploma	18 August 2019
r2.17	Everyday citizen	M	43	Master's degree	20 August 2019
r2.18	Everyday citizen	M	28	No diploma	24 August 2019
r2.19	Everyday citizen	M	26	No diploma	24 August 2019
r3.01	Everyday citizen	M	27	Bachelor's degree	28 June 219
r3.02	Journalist	-	-	-	15 July 2019
r3.03	Think tank	-	-	-	16 July 2019
r3.04	NGO worker	-	-	-	22 July 2019
r3.05	NGO worker	-	-	-	22 July 2019
r3.06	Activist	-	-	-	24 July 2019
r3.07	Activist	-	-	-	24 July 2019
r3.08	NGO worker	-	-	-	25 July 2019
r3.09	Think tank	-	-	-	29 July 2019

r3.10	Academia	-	-	-	30 July 2019
r3.11	NGO worker	-	-	-	30 July 2019
r3.12	Media sector	-	-	-	31 July 2019
r3.13	NGO worker	-	-	-	31 July 2019
r3.14	NGO worker	-	-	-	1 August 2019
r3.15	Politician	-	-	-	2 August 2019
r3.16	NGO worker	-	-	-	3 August 2019
r3.17	Journalist	-	-	-	4 August 2019
r3.18	NGO worker	-	-	-	7 August 2019
r3.19	NGO worker	-	-	-	7 August 2019
r3.20	Influencer	-	-	-	9 August 2019
r3.21	NGO worker	-	-	-	12 August 2019
r3.22	NGO worker	-	-	-	16 August 2019
r3.23	NGO worker	-	-	-	16 August 2019
r3.24	NGO worker	-	-	-	17 August 2019
r3.25	Activist	-	-	-	19 August 2019
r3.26	INGO worker	-	-	-	20 August 2019
r3.27	Activist	-	-	-	24 August 2019
r3.28	NGO worker	-	-	-	25 August 2019

Appendix II: ethics approval letter

University of BRISTOL

Igne Barkauskaite
SPAIS
11 Priory Road
Bristol BS8 1TU
Tel: +44 (0)117 331 0607
www.bristol.ac.uk/spais
spais-ethics@bristol.ac.uk

Marc Pinol Rovira
SPAIS
11 Priory Road
BS8 1TU

7 May 2019

Dear Marc,

Re: Research Ethics Approval

This is to confirm in writing, as previously advised, that the School Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your submitted documents, and is pleased to give full ethical approval for your project.

You are advised to take particular notice of the regulations concerning data storage and data encryption. The Information Commissioner has made it clear that *personal* data subject to the Data Protection Act must be encrypted whenever it is "transported" or "conveyed". This includes data stored on physical media (laptops, CD/DVDs, USB drives, etc.) as well as data transmitted electronically (email, FLUFF, etc.). Failure to do so is a breach of the 7th data protection principle and could result in action being taken against the University in the event of data loss.

- Definitions of personal data and sensitive data can be found here:
  http://www.bris.ac.uk/secretary/dataprotection/glossary.html .
- Information about data storage can be found here:
  http://www.bris.ac.uk/infosec/uobdata/research/.
- Information about data encryption can be found here:
  http://www.bris.ac.uk/infosec/uobdata/encrypt/.

You are encouraged to maintain contact with your supervisors and Dr Filippo Dionigi, Chair of the Research Ethics Committee, informing them of any changes that may occur to your plans or to your research. Should you have any queries or concerns, the Ethics Committee will be pleased to help and support you in any way possible.

Yours sincerely

Igne Barkauskaite
On behalf of SPAIS Research Ethics Committee

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Appendix III: informant's consent form

University of BRISTOL	Digital democracy in hybrid regimes; the case study of Cambodia

Informed consent form for individual members of the civil society in Cambodia

Principal investigator:	Marc Pinol
Name of organisation:	University of Bristol
Provisional project tittle:	Digital democracy in hybrid regimes; the case study of Cambodia

INFORMATION SHEET

I am Marc Pinol, PhD student at the University of Bristol. I am doing research on the use of digital tools in politics in Cambodia. I am going to information you about my research and invite you to be part of it. If you do not understand this form or you have questions, please ask me at any given moment.

- **Purpose of the research**

Over the last years, the use of digital tools has increased in Cambodia, including in politics. However, it is still unclear how they are changing the political scene. This research aims at exploring how the use of digital tools by the civil society is changing political participation. Please, note that this study is NOT about your political preferences; I will not ask you about them.

- **Voluntary participation**

You are being invited to take part in this research because I feel that your experience as a responsible citizen can contribute much to the understanding and knowledge of local political participation. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you will not receive any type of economic compensation for it.

- **Anonymity and confidentiality**

I understand that this is a sensitive topic, which is why I will not be sharing information about you to anyone outside of the research team. The information that I collect from this research project will be kept private at all times. Any information about you will have a pseudonym (fictional name) instead of your name. Only the researchers will know your real name.

- **Right to refuse and/or withdraw**

Your participation is voluntary and may stop participating in the interview at any time that you wish without any consequence, as well as refusing to answer my questions. I will give you an opportunity at the end of the interview modify or remove portions of those, if you do not agree with my notes or if I did not understand you correctly.

- **Who to contact:**

Mr. Marc Pinol; marc.pinol@bristol.ac.uk; 077 736 152

Digital democracy in hybrid regimes; the case study of Cambodia

Thank you for listening/reading to the briefing on this research project. If you are happy to participate, please tick (✓) the boxes below to confirm that you agree with each of the statements and sign the form.

If you do not understand some of the statements, please ask me for more details.

CERTIFICATE OF CONSENT

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study, for which I will not receive any kind of economic reward.	✓
I understand that I can withdraw from the interview at any given moment or refuse to answer some of the questions without any consequences of any kind.	✓
I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my participation within two weeks after the interview has been completed.	✓
I have been explained the purpose and nature of the study, I have been given a written copy of it, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.	✓
I agree to my interview being audio-recorded and transcribed.	✓
I have understood the principles of data protection, confidentiality and anonymity that the researcher will use throughout the study, including in publication.	✓
I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in academic events. In such case, all data will be anonymised, and no personal details will ever be disclosed.	✓
I understand that this signed consent form, original audio recording and transcription will be encrypted, securely stored online, and only members of the research team will have access to them.	✓
I understand that I am free to contact the principal researcher at any time to seek further clarification and information.	✓
I agree I will not divulge information that is shared during the interview, both about the research and other participants, in the case of a group interview or focus group.	✓

Name and signature of principal researcher

30.08.19

លិខិតយល់ព្រមសម្រាប់សមាជិកនៃសង្គមស៊ីវិលក្នុងប្រទេសកម្ពុជា

ប្រធានក្រុមស្ទើបអង្កេត: Marc Pinol
ឈ្មោះស្ថាប័ន: សាកលវិទ្យាល័យ Bristol (University of Bristol)
កម្មវត្ថុនៃគម្រោង: ប្រជាធិបតេយ្យឌីជីថលក្នុងរបបកុនកាត់; កម្មសិក្សាពីប្រទេសកម្ពុជា

តារាងព័ត៌មាន

ខ្ញុំបាន Marc Pinol និស្សិតថ្នាក់បណ្ឌិតនៃសាកលវិទ្យាល័យ Bristol។ ខ្ញុំកំពុងធ្វើការស្រាវជ្រាវលើការប្រើប្រាស់ឧបករណ៍ឌីជីថលក្នុងនយោបាយប្រទេសកម្ពុជា។ ខ្ញុំនឹងជម្រាបលោកអ្នកអំពីការស្រាវជ្រាវរបស់ខ្ញុំ និងអញ្ជើញលោកអ្នកឱ្យ ក្នុងការចូលរួមជាផ្នែកមួយនៃការស្រាវជ្រាវនេះ។ ប្រសិនបើសិនជាលោកអ្នកមិនយល់ត្រូវណាអំពីលិខិតនេះ ឬមានសំណួរណាមួយ លោកអ្នកអាចសួរខ្ញុំបាន។

- ### គោលបំណងនៃការស្រាវជ្រាវ

កំឡុងពេលមួយឆ្នាំយៈចុងក្រោយនេះ   ការប្រើប្រាស់ឧបករណ៍ឌីជីថល   បានកើនឡើងនៅកម្ពុជា   ដោយ ក្នុងនោះរាប់បញ្ចូលទាំងផ្នែកនយោបាយផងដែរ។ ទោះជាយ៉ាងណាក៏ដោយ ភាពស្រុកស្រុកពិលនៅតែបន្តកើតមានឡើងអំពី តួនាទីរបស់ឧបករណ៍ទាំងនោះក្នុងការផ្លាស់ប្តូរទិដ្ឋភាពនយោបាយ។ ការស្រាវជ្រាវនេះមានគោលបំណងក្នុងការស្វែងរក អំពី តើសង្គមស៊ីវិលបានប្រើប្រាស់ឧបករណ៍ដោយរបៀបណាក្នុងការផ្លាស់ប្តូរការចូលរួមនយោបាយ? សូមបញ្ជាក់ផងដែរថា ការ សិក្សានេះ មិនមែន សិក្សាពីទំនោរនយោបាយរបស់លោកអ្នកទេ ហើយខ្ញុំក៏មិនសួរអំពីសំណួរនេះដែរ។

- ### ការចូលរួមស្ម័គ្រចិត្ត

លោកអ្នកត្រូវបានអញ្ជើញឱ្យចូលរួមក្នុងការស្រាវជ្រាវមួយនេះ ព្រោះខ្ញុំយល់ថាបទពិសោធន៍របស់អ្នក ក្នុងនាមជាប្រជាពលរដ្ឋ ប្រកបដោយទន់លទ្ធឧស្សត្រូវ   អាចផ្តល់បានច្រើននូវការយល់ដឹង   និងចំណេះដឹកាក់ព័ន្ធទៅនឹងការចូលរួម ក្នុងសកម្មភាពនយោបាយនៅក្នុងស្រុក។ ការចូលរួមរបស់លោកអ្នកក្នុងការស្រាវជ្រាវនេះ ធ្វើឡើងក្នុងន័យជាការស្ម័គ្រចិត្តទាំង ស្រុង ហើយលោកអ្នកនឹងមិនទទួលប្រាក់ឧបត្ថម្ភពីការស្រាវជ្រាវនេះ ឡើយ។

- ### អនាមិកភាព និងការរក្សាសម្ងាត់

ខ្ញុំយល់ថា នេះជាប្រធានបទដ៏សើបរសើបមួយ ដែលជាហេតុធ្វើឱ្យខ្ញុំនឹងមិនចែករំលែកព័ត៌មានណាមួយរបស់អ្នកទៅកាន់អ្នកផ្សេង ក្រៅពីក្រុមអ្នកស្រាវជ្រាវឡើយ។ ព័ត៌មានដែលលោកខ្ញុំទទួលបានពីកម្រោងស្រាវជ្រាវ និងរក្សាទុកជាការសម្ងាត់គ្រប់កាលៈទេសៈ។ គ្រប់ព័ត៌មានរបស់អ្នកនឹងត្រូវក្រមជាឈ្មោះក្លែងក្លាយ (ឈ្មោះប្រឌិត) ជំនួសឱ្យឈ្មោះពិតប្រាកដរបស់អ្នក។ មានតែក្រុមអ្នក ស្រាវជ្រាវ ដែលអាចដឹងពីឈ្មោះពិតរបស់អ្នក។

- ### សិទ្ធិក្នុងការបដិសេធ និង/ឬ ដកចេញ

ការចូលរួមរបស់លោកអ្នកកគឺជាការស្ម័គ្រចិត្ត ហើយអាចនឹងបំផ្លាញល់បទសម្ងាស់ន៍ ក៏ដូចជាបដិសេធក្នុងការធ្វើសម្ភាសរបស់ ខ្ញុំ នៅគ្រប់ពេលដែលលោកអ្នកចង់ ដោយគ្មានផលវិបាកណាមួយឡើយ។ ខ្ញុំនឹងផ្តល់ឱកាសឱ្យលោកអ្នក ក្នុងការកែសម្រួល ឬ ដកចេញនូវផ្នែកណាមួយ បើអ្នកយល់ទាស់នឹងការកត់ចំណាំរបស់ខ្ញុំ ឬ ប្រសិនបើខ្ញុំយល់ខុសត្រង់ចំការណាមួយ។

- ### ព័ត៌មានអំពីអ្នកទំនាក់ទំនង:

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សូមអរគុណសំរាប់ការស្តាប់   /   ការអានអំពីព័ត៌មានសង្ខេបនៃកិច្ចការស្រាវជ្រាវនេះ។ ប្រសិនបើលោកអ្នកពេញចិត្តក្នុងការចូលរួមដឹករវេងនេះ សូមគូសសញ្ញា (✓)នៅក្នុងប្រអប់ខាងក្រោម ដើម្បីបញ្ជាក់ថា លោកអ្នកបានយល់ស្របនឹងការលើកឡើងនៅខាងឆ្នេងប្រអប់ ហើយសូមចុះហត្ថលេខារបស់លោកអ្នក។

ប្រសិនលោកអ្នកមិនយល់ត្រូងការលើកឡើងណាមួយក្នុងលិខិតនៃការយល់ព្រម   លោកអ្នកអាចធ្វើការសាកសួរ ខ្ញុំបានដើម្បីព័ត៌មានបន្ថែម។

លិខិតនៃការយល់ព្រម

ទន្ទឹងក្រុងចិត្តក្នុងការចូលរួមកម្មសិក្សាស្រាវជ្រាវនេះ ប៉ើនោះជាខ្ញុំនិងបានបំពេញលទ្ធផលបានការឧបត្ថម្ភជាទឹកប្រាក់ក៏ ដោយ។	$\angle$
ខ្ញុំយល់ថា ខ្ញុំអាចធ្វើការបញ្ឈប់បទសម្ភាសន៍បានគ្រប់ពេល ឬអាចធ្វើការបដិសេធចំពោះសំណួរចាកប្រធាន ឬជំទាស់ចំពោះសំណួរដែលខ្ញុំមិនចង់ឆ្លើយ។	$\mathcal{L}$
ខ្ញុំបានយល់ថា ខ្ញុំអាចធ្វើការអនុញ្ញាតយកសិទ្ធិអនុញ្ញាតក្នុងការប្រើប្រាស់ទិន្នន័យបេក្ខភាពក្នុងអំឡុងពេល២ សប្តាហ៍ បន្ទាប់ពីបទសម្ភាសន៍ត្រូវបានបញ្ចប់ជាស្ថាពរ។	$\angle$
ខ្ញុំបានទទួលនូវការពន្យល់លំអិតពីគោលបំណង និងគោលការណ៍គ្រឹះនៃការសិក្សា។ ខ្ញុំបានទទួលច្បាប់ ច័ន្ទនៃពត៌មានទាំងនេះ និងទទួលបានឱកាសនៅក្នុងការសួរសំណួរដែលពាក់ព័ន្ធ។	$\checkmark$
ខ្ញុំយល់ព្រម អោយមានការថតសំលេង និងកត់ត្រាពីបទសម្ភាសន៍។	$\angle$
ខ្ញុំយល់ច្បាស់ រាល់គោលការណ៍នានាដូចជា ការពារទិន្នន័យ ការសម្ងាត់ និងភាពអនាមិក ដែលក្រុមអ្នកស្រាវជ្រាវ រួមទាំងស្ថាប័នរបោះពុម្ពប្រើប្រាស់កំឡុងពេលសិក្សានេះ ។	$\angle$
ខ្ញុំបានយល់ថា ចំណុចសក្រសចេញពីបទសម្ភាសន៍របស់ខ្ញុំ រាចនឹងប្រើប្រាស់នៅក្នុងព្រឹត្តិការណ៍សិក្សា នានា នៅក្នុងការណីបែបនេះ ទិន្នន័យទាំងឡាយនឹងត្រូវបានធានាថាមានការការពារ ដោយផ្អែកលើគោលការណ៍នៃភាពអនាមិក ដែលគ្មានការបើកបរផ្ទាល់ទិន្នន័យ ឬពត៌មានផ្ទាល់ខ្លួនឡើយ ។	$\checkmark$
ខ្ញុំយល់ថា លិខិតព្រមព្រៀង ខ្សែអាតសំលេងបទសម្ភាសន៍ និងសេចក្តីឯកសារដ៏បទសម្ភាសន៍ធ្វើនឹងត្រូវបាន ប្រែសម្រួល និងរក្សាទុកប្រកបដោយសុវត្ថិភាពលើប្រព័ន្ធអនឡាញ ដែលមានតែក្រុបអ្នកស្រាវជ្រាវប៉ុណ្ណោះអា ចចូលមើលបាន។	$\mathcal{L}$
ខ្ញុំយល់ថា ខ្ញុំអាចធ្វើការទាក់ទងទៅកាន់ប្រធានផ្នែកស្រាវជ្រាវបានគ្រប់ពេល ដើម្បីការបន្ថែ និងពត៌មាន បន្ថែម។	$\mathcal{L}$
ខ្ញុំឯកភាពព្រមព្រៀងថា និងបន្ទនធ្វើការថែរក្សាយរាល់ខ្លួមសារ ប្លាព័ត៌មានដែលត្រូវបានលើកឡើងក្នុងកំឡុងពេលធ្វើបទសម្ភាសន៍ ទាំងរវាងកិច្ចការស្រាវជ្រាវ និងអ្នកចូលរួមដទៃទៀត ក្នុងការណីបទសម្ភាសន៍នោះត្រូវបានធ្វើឡើងជាក្រុម។	$\checkmark$

ឈ្មោះ ~~[blurred]~~ និងទីមាត្តលេខារបស់ប្រធានផ្នែកស្រាវជ្រាវ

18.08.19