

Research Brief: Youth Political Participation in Cambodia

By **Bong Chansambath and Sen Chantarasingh**

Additional Research Support: Pia Betz, Sebastian Hanak

Editor: Vanaka Chhem-Kieth



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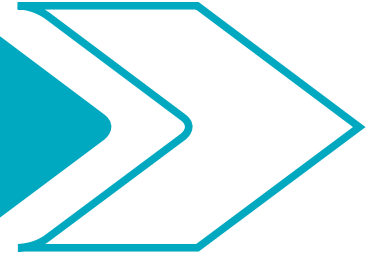
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1. NOTE ON THE 2017 COMMUNE ELECTIONS

This research brief was written ahead of the 4 June 2017 Cambodian commune elections, and completed shortly after the results came out. It therefore draws on a richer literature on the 2012 local elections and 2013 national elections.

2. INTRODUCTION

Politikoffee, as a group of media-savvy youth interested in politics, have made the conscious choice of actively participating in political discussions.

However, in our research – we found out that politics is not an activity you decide to participate in, or not. Indeed, it is “ingrained in the routines of making a living, raising families, coping with daily problems and interacting with others”¹.

2.1. Problem Statement

Politikoffee attracted much attention over the years, for being “at odds with Khmer culture”² or for being at the forefront of an “unexpected new trend”³, as a rare youth group actively participating in politics through grassroots debates and discussions.

These comments suggest that youth political participation in Cambodia may be the exception, rather than the norm.

We decided to find out more about this assumption by collecting data and findings on youth political participation, which we are presenting in this brief.

2.2. Research Objectives

The main objectives of this research brief are to:

1. Identify key political participation trends among youth in Cambodia;
 2. challenge the dominant, negative narrative according to which youth are not interested in participating politically; and
 3. draw on existing research to illustrate and reiterate the importance of youth political participation.
- #### 4. Research Questions

There are three main research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Cambodian youth on political participation?
2. Why political participation matters?
3. What are the obstacles to political participation in Cambodia?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This brief draws on secondary data exclusively. The data was drawn from various research papers (NGOs, think-tank, government, etc.) on the topic of youth and political participation.



Students from Bak Touk High School, in Phnom Penh
(Source: Flickr, ECCC, CC By-Sa-2.0)

¹ Ben Kerkvliet, “Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours).” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 1 (2009): 232, 240, quoted in Kimhean Hok and Mun Vong, “Facebooking: Youth’s Everyday Politics in Cambodia,” *Cambodia Development Resource Institute* (2017): 15.

² Jack Board, “Politics Meets Coffee for Free-talking Cambodian Youth,” *Channel News Asia*, November 4, 2017, accessed June 7, 2017, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/politics-meets-coffee-for-free-talking-cambodian-youth-7696560>.

³ Pisen Sou, “Organizing Events Lets Cambodian Youth Hone Leadership Skills,” *Voice of America*, 12 September 2015, accessed June 7, 2017, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/organizing-events-lets-cambodian-youth-hone-leadership-skills/2955520.html>.

5. KEYWORDS

5.1. Youth

Any Cambodian aged from 15 to 30 years old, as per the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport's (MoYES)⁴. This research brief follows this definition, unless otherwise stated.

5.2. Political Participation

Though there can be more than one definition, this brief defines "political participation" based on Milbrath and Goel (1977) as any activities that influence government policies directly or indirectly⁵. This suggests that political participation can take a wide range of forms, so long as it contributes to shaping policies.

Political participation: any activities that influence government policies directly or indirectly

Milbrath and Goel, 1977



5.3. Formal Participation

We interpret formal participation as activities that are part of the "institutional political framework of a country"⁶ – such as joining a political party, voting, lobbying, campaigning, attending political meetings, contacting officials, etc⁷.

5.4. Informal Participation

This refers to involvement outside of the institutional political framework of a country, including civil disobediences or support for a cause through protests and demonstrations,

or more recently through the use of internet, specifically social media as a platform for participating in politics⁸. Network-based activities, such as NGOs or student groups, would also fall in that broad category⁹.

6. POPULAR PERCEPTIONS

6.1. Negative Reputation of Political Participation in Cambodia

Overall, Cambodians still distrust political parties¹⁰.

It is also widely accepted that the political environment limits rather than facilitates political participation. The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL) defines the current political atmosphere as "very tense"¹¹. More specifically, it describes the political pattern as limiting "[...] political participation, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly [...]. This includes a lack of an open and constructive political discourse on issues of public concern [...] and continuing limitations on political participation for the Cambodian public"¹².

As a consequence, a majority of youth is not interested in political involvement, so as to avoid "trouble"¹³. Additional limitations include a rigid social hierarchy, a culture of obedience to authority, or economic limitations (leading people to pursue other priorities)¹⁴.

4 "National Policy on Youth Development," *Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports* (2011), assessed May 6, 2017, http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Cambodia_2011_Policy_Youth_Development.pdf

5 Lester W. Milbrath and M. I. Goel, *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?* (Skokie, IL: Rand McNally College, 1997), 2.

6 Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology," in *Human Affairs* (2012), p.289, DOI: 10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1

7 Iasonas Lamprianou, "Contemporary Political Participation Research: A Critical Assessment," in *Democracy in Transition*, ed. Kyriakos N. Demetriou (Germany, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2013), p. 25. DOI 10.1007/978-3-642-30068-4_2

8 Ibid, 25.

9 Ekman and Amnå, "Political,"289.

10 Silas Everett and Tim Meisburger, "Democracy in Cambodia – 2014 A Survey of the Cambodian Electorate," *The Asia Foundation* (2014): 10-11, accessed May 3, 2017, <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/DemocracyinCambodia2014.pdf>.

11 "Democracy, Elections and Reform in Cambodia 2016," *The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia* (2017): 8-9, accessed May 2, 2017, https://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/397395COMFREL_Democracy_Report_2016_final_1_March_2017_.pdf.

12 COMFREL, *2012 Annual Report on Democracy, Elections and Reform in Cambodia*, Phnom Penh: COMFREL, 2013, quoted in Seiha Heng et al, "Enduring the Gap: Decentralisation Reform and Youth Participation in Local Rural Governance," *Cambodia Development Resource Institute*, (2014): 9, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://web.cdri.org.kh:8080/newgenlibctx/View?From=Library&CatId=24678&OwnLibId=1&LibraryId=1>.

13 67% of respondents associated political participation with "trouble", as seen in "Summary of Research Finding: Youth's Perspectives on Youth Candidates for National and Sub-National Elected Bodies," *Youth Resource Development Program* (2016): 5, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.yrdp.org/download/research-summary-report-on-youth-perspective-on-youth-candidate-2016/>.

14 Heng, "Enduring the Gap,": 8.

Overall, Cambodians still distrust political parties

Everett and Meisburger,
The Asia Foundation, 2016



6.2 Reputation of Political Participation: More Interest Than It Seems

As the historically high participation levels of the recent 2017 commune elections suggest (86% according to early reports)¹⁵, politics associated with “distrust” and “trouble” is only one side of the story.

Looking at the 2012 commune elections and the 2013 national elections, youth turnout rates are difficult to evaluate – as there is no systematic methods to collect this information across the country¹⁶. However, sources clearly suggest youth participation has been significant.

A BBC Media in Action/UNDP national survey found out that 47% of 18-24 years old voted in the 2012 commune elections¹⁷, figures superior to countries celebrated for their electoral democracies such as France or the UK, for elections in similar years. Indeed, only 43% of French 18-24 years old voted in the 2014 commune elections¹⁸, whereas an estimated 32% British 18-24 years old voted in the 2013 commune elections¹⁹ ²⁰

Further, COMFREL found that 93.4% of all

- 15 Simon Roughneen, “High turnout in Cambodian local elections as opposition poised to gain,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, June 5, 2017, accessed June 7, 2017, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Policy-Politics/High-turnout-in-Cambodian-local-elections-as-opposition-poised-to-gain>.
- 16 “Participation of Youth in Elections,” *The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia* (13 July 2007): 1, accessed June 6, 2017, https://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/5651261194396308COMFREL_Editorial_YouthInElection_En.pdf
- 17 “Media Habits and Information Sources of Youth in Cambodia,” *BBC Media in Action, UNDP*(2014): 19, accessed June 6, 2017, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/research/cambodia_media_habits_research_report.pdf
- 18 Pascal Kremer, “Pourquoi moins d’un jeune sur deux a voté aux premier tour des municipales,” *Le Monde*, March 28 2014 accessed May 5, 2017, http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/03/28/pourquoi-moins-d-un-jeune-sur-deux-a-vote-aux-premier-tour_4391512_823448.html.
- 19 IPPR quoted in “Force Young People to Vote at First Opportunity, Says Think Tank”, 26 August 2014, accessed June 6, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-23832607>.
- 20 Cambodian commune elections, French and British national elections took place during this research press time, so final figures could not be included – with provisional overall turnouts reaching a historical high in Cambodia, and an apparently huge youth turnout in the UK.

eligible youth registered to vote ahead of the 2013 national assembly elections²¹. In comparison, one out of two French youth were either not properly registered or not at all, in the 2017 presidential elections²².

Voter turnout is comparable or even superior to countries such as the UK or France



Houses of Parliament in London, UK (Source: Pixabay, Marco Luzi, CC0 Public Domain)

Additional data further suggests that given the right issue and platform, youth willingly participate politically.

- ▶ 79% discuss political issues informally²³;
- ▶ 71% of youth in Cambodia perceive volunteering in NGOs as a better way to be involved in politics than joining a party²⁴;
- ▶ 89% believe that political entities should let youth involve in politics more by giving youth a chance to express their views²⁵; and
- ▶ Facebook led more youth to vote in 2013, according to an online survey²⁶.

- 21 “2013 National Assembly Elections: Final Assessment and Report,” *The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia* (2013): 94, accessed May 2, 2017, https://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/781389Final_Report_and_Assessment_National_Assembly_Elections_Final_24_12_2013.pdf.
- 22 Chloé Pilorget-Rezzouk, “Radiés des listes, mal-inscrits... ces Français qui ne voteront pas malgré eux,” *L’Express*, April 22 2017, accessed on June 7 2017, http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/radies-des-listes-mal-inscrits-ces-francais-qui-ne-voteront-pas-malgre-eux_1900773.html
- 23 *Based on a sample survey across the country, but focused on urban, educated youth, “Summary of Research Finding: Youth’s Perspectives on Youth Candidates for National and Sub-National Elected Bodies,” Youth Resource Development Program (2016): 6, accessed May 2, 2017, <http://www.yrdp.org/download/research-summary-report-on-youth-perspective-on-youth-candidate-2016/>.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Virak Thun, “Youth Political Participation in Cambodia: Role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs),” Master’s thesis, Northern Illinois University, 2014, quoted in Hok and Vong, “Facebooking,” 16.

These figures suggest that Cambodian youth have an interest in political participation, despite popular perceptions of the contrary

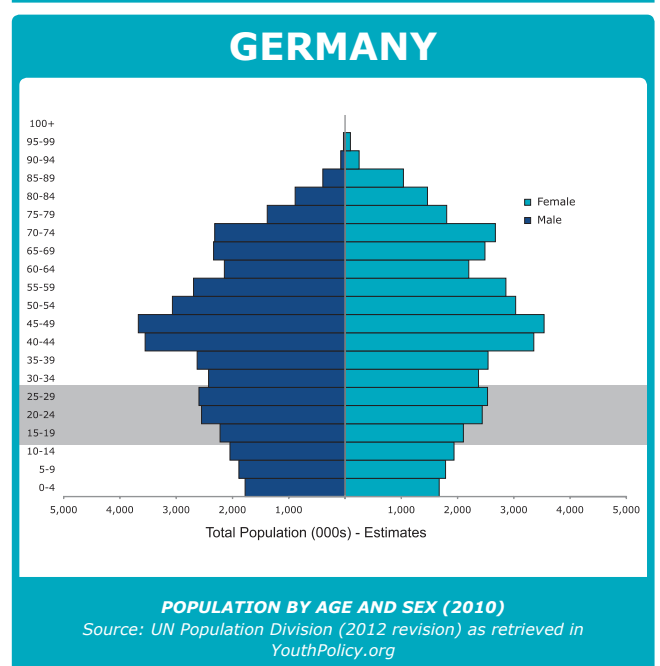
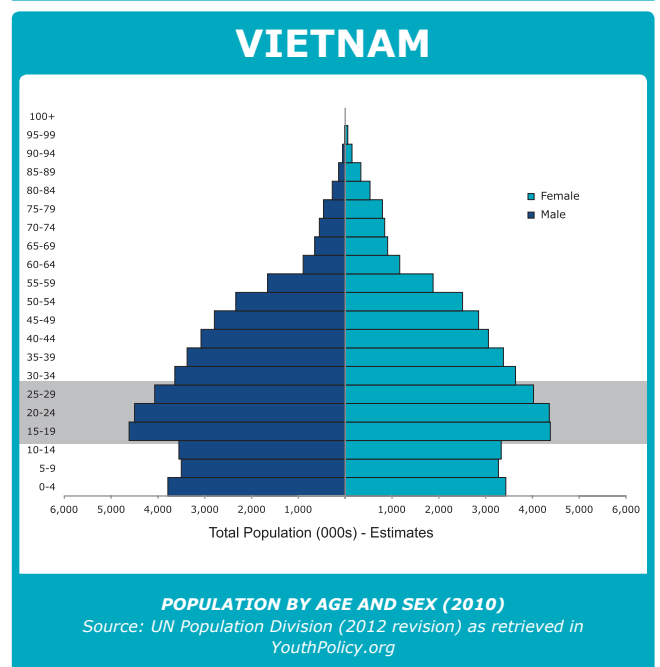
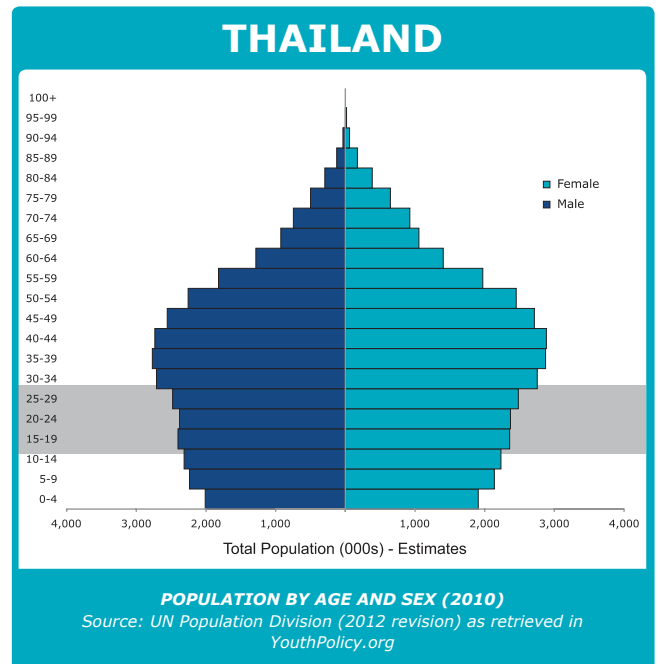
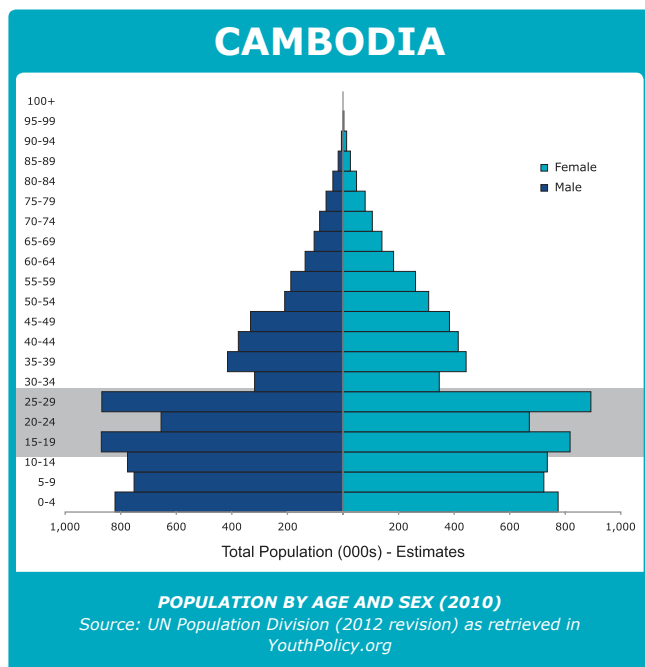
7. WHY DOES YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION MATTER

7.1. By the numbers: Youth are a formidable political and development force

There are a lot of youth in Cambodia. Almost two thirds of Cambodians are under the age of 30 years old (just over 6 out of 10 people)²⁷.

Indeed, Cambodia has the highest proportion of youth in Southeast Asia²⁸, which makes their voice hugely important for the country's politics and development.²⁹The weight of their vote, ideas and energy puts them in a unique position to shape the nation's future.

The graphics below compare different population pyramids.



²⁷ "About Cambodia," United Nations Development Programme, accessed May 2, 2017, <http://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

²⁸ "Education – Learning Throughout Life – Youth," UNESCO, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/phnompenh/education/learning-throughout-life/youth/>

²⁹ Heng, "Enduring the Gap," 5

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) is criticized for limiting opportunities for youth to participate in politics, as expressed by youth party members³⁰. In 2013, only 3 parliamentarians under the age of 35 years old were elected, or 1% of all representatives³¹, which is far from the total demographic they are a part of (one third).

However, the RGC still acknowledges – in theory – the key role of youth towards socio-economic development. In its National Youth Policy adopted in 2011, the RGC refers to youth as “a key resource and the most valuable for national economic, social, cultural and environmental development and for the upholding of peace now and in the future”³²

Youth are a key resource and the most valuable for national economic, social, cultural and environmental development and for the upholding of peace now and in the future

Royal Government of Cambodia Youth Policy



7.2 Individual benefits of political participation³³

Research found out that participating in politics helps youth develop open-mindedness, personal responsibility and self-esteem.³⁴ It is key to developing them into more informed and responsible citizens³⁵.

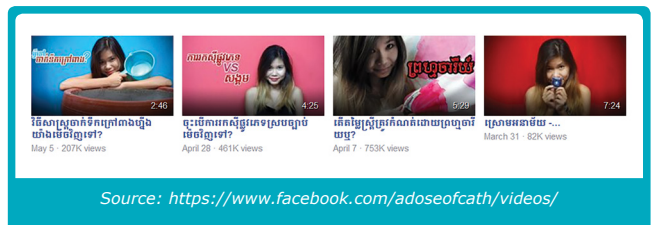
The need to be better informed can be illustrated by a BBC/UNDP survey which found out that though youth may have an interest in politics, they lack more substantial knowledge. Indeed, while 3 out of 4 respondents had heard about “democracy”,

most could not define the concept and of the few that did, none mentioned “voting” nor “elections”³⁶.

7.3 Do new spaces mean more participation?

Technology, mainly internet and social media, is undoubtedly creating new spaces for youth political participation. While it might be too early to draw firm conclusions, these new platforms are poised to deeply shape young people’s political participation.

*7.3.1 Picture of A Dose of Cath blog
Caterine V Harry, blogger for a Dose of Cath and Politikoffee writer has been publishing viral videos on social and gender issues, reaching up to 750k viewers and generating passionate discussions.*



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/adoseofcath/videos/>

*7.3.2 Hun Sen facebook
Politicians, including Prime Minister Hun Sen, have started engaging with youth directly via Facebook. In January 2016, a motorcycle registration law was amended following a social media outcry – mostly led by youth.*



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/hunsencambodia/videos/935217079860123/>

To take one example, the surging number in Internet and mobile phone usage indicate that the surging number in Internet

30 Johannes Vogel, “Party Youth Wings Cambodia and Germany: A Comparative Perspective,” *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* (2016): 57-58, accessed May 10, 2017, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_47409-1522-2-30.pdf?170131051105.
 31 “2013 National Assembly,” 29
 32 “National Policy on Cambodian Youth Development,” Royal Government of Cambodia, accessed May 11, 2017, http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Cambodia_2011_Policy_Youth_Development.pdf.
 33 Heng, “Enduring the Gap,” 5.
 34 Ibid.
 35 Ibid.

36 Phoastey Heng et al., “Youth Civic Participation: Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices and Media,” *United Nations Development Programme Cambodia*, (2010): 12, accessed May 10, 2017, <http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DemoGov/Youth%20KAP%20Final%20with%20Data%20Tables.pdf?download>.

and mobile phone usage indicate that Cambodians – and disproportionately youth – have more access to communication and information than ever before.

For example, smartphone use jumped by almost 50% in just 3 years. It has increased from 20% in 2013 to 48% in 2016³⁷.

Of all those Cambodian smartphone users, 82% of them are university students and graduates³⁸. Though access to smartphone and the internet do not come without challenges (ex.: fake news), they mark a clear break with the limited choice in quality and quantity previous generations faced. Only 3 years ago, the internet and mobile phones as source for civic information for youth still lagged behind “friends”, “people in my neighborhood” or television³⁹.

- ▶ Smartphone use increased from 20% in 2013 to 48% of the population in 2016
- ▶ 8 out of 10 smartphone users are university students and graduates

The internet has since surpassed all other sources of information, across all age groups in Cambodia⁴⁰. This development is not without challenges, as some observers argue that social media and the internet may have change the way people engage with politics, but not necessarily the overall quality⁴¹.

This being said, other research also welcome the benefits of new technology – such as Facebook as a “driver for political evolution”, a tool to “expand the civic space” or a one to “shorten the time (youth’s) everyday politics takes to exert major impact”⁴².

8. OBSTACLES

Despite many encouraging signs that youth are both showing an interest in politics, and finding new ways of participating – many obstacles persist:

▶ **Popular perceptions:** Earlier in this paper, we explained that negative perceptions towards political participation persist among some youth⁴³.

▶ **Political environment:** Fear of getting into trouble⁴⁴ impacts negatively on youth’s willingness to participate in politics, while dominance of a single party and absence of rule of law discourage young people to become politically active⁴⁵.

Despite the specific government policy on youth, youth still lack of opportunity to directly involve in political process⁴⁶. Youth are also often excluded from the policy planning process, despite that they will bear the consequences of most policy decisions.⁴⁷

▶ **Hierarchy and culture:** Historically, a culture of obedience to elders and authority has been an integral part of Cambodian relations, which is not conducive to youth playing a key role in influencing government policies⁴⁸.

▶ **Economic Factors:** Economic factors remain an obstacle curtailing further civic engagement for many families – and youth – as more basic worries of subsistence are the priorities for large portions of the population⁴⁹.

37 Kimchhoy Phong et al, “Mobile Phones and Internet Use in Cambodia 2016,” USAID et al, (2016): 9, accessed May 18, 2017, <http://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Mobile-Phones-and-Internet-Use-in-Cambodia-2016.pdf>.

38 Ibid.

39 “Media Habits and Information Sources of Youth in Cambodia,” UNDP, BBC Media in Action, (2014): 17, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DemoGov/Media%20Habits%20and%20Information%20Sources%20of%20Youth%20in%20Cambodia.pdf>

40 Surrusco Matt, “Internet Passes TV as Go-To News Source,” *The Cambodia Daily*, 16 Dec 2016, accessed May 30, 2017, <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/internet-passes-tv-go-news-source-122055/>

41 Hong Chenda, “Q&A: Sebastian Strangio, Journalist and Author of Hun Sen’s Cambodia,” *VOA Cambodia*, May 30 2017, accessed June 7, 2017, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/q-and-a-with-sebastian-strangio-journalist-and-author-of-hun-sen-s-cambodia/3876072.html>

42 Hok and Mun, “Facebooking” 30-32

43 Heng, “Enduring the gap,” 16.

44 “Youth’s Perspective,” 5.

45 Cristina Mansfield, “Youth in Cambodia: A Force for Change,” *Pact Cambodia* (2008): 29, accessed May 11, 2017, http://www.pactcambodia.org/Publications/Pact_Gen/Youth%20Report.pdf.

46 Johannes Vogel, “Party Youth Wings Cambodia and Germany: A Comparative Perspective,” *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* (2016): 57-58, accessed May 10, 2017, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_47409-1522-2-30.pdf?170131051105.

47 “Situation Analysis of Youth in Cambodia,” *United Nations Country Team*, (2009): xiii, May 10, 2017, https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/Part1_Situation_Analysis_of_Youth_in_Cambodia_2009.pdf.

48 I.W. Mabbett and David P. Chandler *The Khmers* (Chaing Mai, Silkworm Books, 1996); Ovesen et al., *When Every Household is an Island: Social Organization and Power Structures in Rural Cambodia*, (Uppsala: Department of Cultural Anthropology, 1996), quoted in Hok and Mun, “Facebooking” 25.

49 Heng, “Enduring the Gap,” 8.

- ▶ **Limited education:** Because Cambodian youths still do not have substantial knowledge about some of the most important elements of a democratic society like accountability, transparency or civic engagement,⁵⁰ participating meaningfully in politics remains too abstract for many.
- ▶ **Access to information for rural areas:** Youth in urban area have better access to information than those who live in the rural areas, as well as do male over female youth⁵¹. In rural provinces including Ratanakiri or Kratie, some youth even report having had no recent access to either TV nor Internet⁵². These gaps will need to be reduced for more youth to engage with political in meaningful ways.

9. CONCLUSION

The state of political participation - and most specifically young people's participation - is a crucially important subject in Cambodia.

The 2013 national elections surprised most specialists and everyday citizens, not only by their results, but also due to the increased role of social media in shaping political participation. The 2017 commune elections provisional figures suggest a historically high voter turnout. Though we will have to wait to obtain more detailed trends on youth engagement, it is safe to say that it will be significantly high, and will continue to play a key role leading to the 2018 national elections.

This brief and the video produced alongside it (www.facebook.com/politikoffee/video) explore key trends and questions related to the participation of youth in politics. One of the main focus was to challenge the common assumption according to which youth are disinterested by politics, using data and facts from a range of existing research.

It seems clear to us that recent evidence strongly suggests that youth are willing to participate politically, despite popular perceptions suggesting otherwise. The youth voter turnout, the explosion in internet and social media use – especially among Cambodian youth – are depicting a demographic actively engaged via informal participation platforms.

In order to engage critically with “influencing government policies directly or indirectly”, youth will continue to face obstacles – a limited political environment, cultural norms (obedience to authority, hierarchy, etc.), economic factors or limited education.

However, our assessment is that youth's political participation in Cambodia will continue to grow, alongside technological advances and against social and political limitations.

⁵⁰ Heng, “Youth Civic Participation,” 12.

⁵¹ “On Adolescent Engagement in Cambodia,” *Indochina Research Ltd* (2016): 7, accessed May 10, 2017, https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/Final_Adolescent_Engagement_study_UNICEF_Cambodia_and_Indochina.pdf.

⁵² Ibid

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Politikoffee Mini-Film Series - Research Brief: Youth Political Participation in Cambodia

We live in both exciting and challenging times in Cambodia. We, at Politikoffee, are determined to make the most of the current national context – in which we can access an unprecedented quantity of information, against the backdrop of an uncertain political context and a civil society under increasing pressure.

In parallel to growing our weekly forum activities, bringing young Cambodians to discuss current affairs since 2011, we have launched a brand new website (www.politikoffee.com) and media activities since May 2016. With these new initiatives, we want to

provide even more fellow young Cambodians with safe platforms to discuss and debate issues that matter to us.

Our new Mini-Film Series targets a tech-savvy audience via the Web and social media. We want to make policy analysis and commentary more accessible to young Cambodians by producing short, dynamic, informative and visually impactful videos. These videos will aim to help foster a culture of dialogue in Cambodia through constructive discussion and debate.

Youth Political Participation

The state of political participation – and most specifically youth's – is a crucially important subject in Cambodia. The 2013 national elections surprised most specialists and everyday citizens, not only by their results, but also due to the increased role of social media in shaping political participation. The 2017 commune elections provisional figures suggest a historically high voter turnout. Though we will have to wait to obtain more detailed trends on youth engagement, it is safe to say that it will be significantly high, and will continue to play a key role leading to the 2018 national elections.

This brief and the video produced alongside it explore some key trends and questions related to the participation of youth in politics. One of the main focus was to challenge the common assumption according to which youth are disinterested by politics, using data and facts from a range of existing research.

We hope you find it useful and that Cambodian youth continue to participate in politics, through all the platforms at their disposal.

The Politikoffee and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung team

Please find our previous videos on:

www.politikoffee.com or
www.facebook.com/politikoffee/videos

Including:

1. How (un)healthy and (un)safe is Food in Cambodia
2. Cambodia, Social Media and Youth

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