Cambodian New Generation: from Family Dependents to State Influencers

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Abstract
Against the backdrop of recent social, economic and political developments, traditional interactions between youth, adults and the State have been transformed in a manner that enables youth to engage in politics in new ways. This paper analyses what has made the interactions between youth and the state change, how this change impacts on politics and what the State response to such change has been. The analysis is based on data collected through a nationwide survey of 1,600 citizens conducted by the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI). Findings from this show that the main causes of change reflect new and better opportunities for young people's education, mobility and digital skills. The change also stems from the breakdown of more traditional interpersonal platforms for interactions and the apparent disinterest of the state in addressing the many challenges facing today's youth. These changing dynamics have meant that youth are able to influence State decisions by expressing support for issues through 'likes' for political parties on social media platforms and to influence voter behaviors. In response to increased online activity, the Cambodian Prime Minister has been prompted to reach young people through a Facebook page, established to address issues as they arise. Future political stability will significantly depend on the State's interactions with young people and its ability to address youth-related issues in meaningful and productive ways.

Keywords: Cambodian new generation, politics, development, youth, adult and State interactions

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Introduction

Social interactions have changed, which is obvious in the context of Cambodia's current political and socio-economic development. Such change has an impact on people's views and opinions, particularly among youth[1] and adults. Change in this context, is a change of social interaction between three parties; youth, adult, and State[2]. Traditionally, youth were bound by historic family control, in terms of decision-making and choice of selecting partners, especially among young women[3]. Hierarchy and respect for leaders, including within the family, are very strong in Khmer society. One should have no protest against parents' decision or criticize leaders; one must be respectful to them; older age is a matter that needs to respect in terms of their decision (Martin 1994). Respect of hierarchy is everywhere including in people with ranking positions (ibid). Nowadays, youth have more free choice, and are able to be more involved both socio-economically and politically, since the 2013 national election when youth started looking for a new type of governance (Un 2015). The "youth" generation, aged 15-30, is defined by the national youth's employment policy. Unlike adults, born after the Khmer Rouge Regime (1975-1979), youth have felt less debt of gratitude to the liberation from the civil war and have little memory of the history of political turmoil, civil war, genocide and life hardship that is felt by the previous generation. The youth generation has access to better education, information technology and social media tools, that the adult generation were typically deprived of.

According to a survey conducted in 2019 by Cambodian Development Resource Institute (CDRI), with 1600 interviewees from 101 villages, in five provinces and the city of Phnom Penh, greater autonomy is given to youth nowadays. Unlike in the past, when youth (especially females) were required to adhere to parents' principles. These days, youth tend to receive a lot more mutual respect from adults, resulting in less restriction on youth's decision-making and choices. With increased autonomy and less strict control imposed, young generation have gone through a transition from family dependents, to family key supporters. With transition in both role and responsibility, youth encounter tough challenges, and the State is unable to efficiently respond to their needs. Subsequently, youth have a higher expectation of the future, and so further seek support, transparency and accountability from their politicians and political parties, and require their voices be heard and needs to address through Government policy (Eng and Hughes 2017). This article argues that youth with new social interactions and experiences have changed traditional relations between adult, State, and youth themselves.

The article will answer some questions including 1) who are the new generation of Cambodia? 2) What are the relations between new generation, old generation and State? 3) What are the new forms of relations between these triple parties? 4) Why new the forms of relations occurred? In the subsequent sections, the paper will present 1) Change between youth and adult relations 2) Change between youth and the State relations.

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[1] Youth and young people will use interchangeably in this context
[2] State is referred to the three tie of governments including national, provincial and local governments
[3] A gender norm that describes how women should behavior and respect husband as well as parents for generations

Change between youth and adult relations

Youth attained higher education is better off compared to adult's education achievement. As can be seen from the CDRI survey conducted in 2019, 55% of adults' education ended at primary school, the lower level of education system in Cambodia. Whereas, 63% of youth is continuing onto higher education, and 14% of youth completed tertiary education at University which is higher than adults (4%) who were capable of continuing onto the highest education system. This is reflected the ability of young generation in building up self-confidence and in making decision for the future choices, enabling them to evolve from parents' domination both socio-economic and political participation.
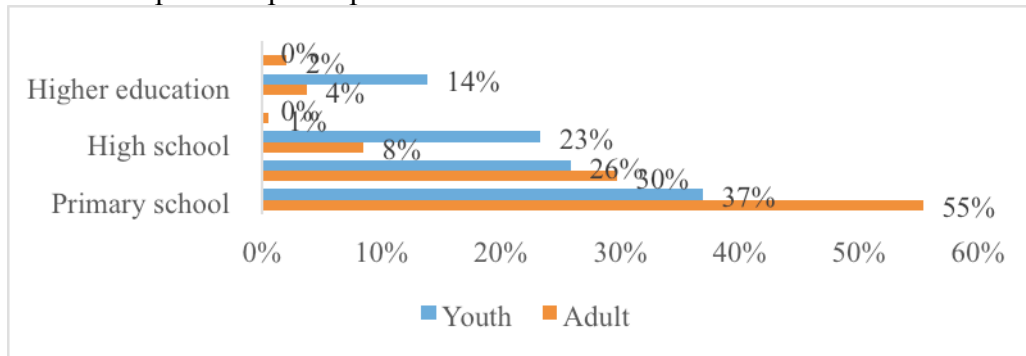
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Figure 1 Youth and adult's levels of education attainment

Sharing and receiving information through electronic technology has significant impact on the youth's capability to learn and understand the world that sharp new types of interactions socio-economically and politically. According to the survey, 61% of youth used internet with 63% owned smart phones to access information online easily due to the fact that internet is considered to be almost free in Cambodia. 89% of youth used internet to read political information. Only 26% of adults used the internet and small proportion owned smart phones; of the ratio, 92% of adults used internet to read political information. Unlike adults with less competent in technology, youth have been excel with the interactions over social media by using smartphones for raising issues of socio-economics and politics online (Chheang 2015). The accessibility of modern interactions has weakened the State control over media, and traditional interactions of the State with society. Youth have shared new political opinions over the weak national performance, and are able to acknowledge the shortcomings of State institutions, in order to counteract issues of corruption, social injustice, land grabbing and deforestation (ibid).

Youth migrants are increasingly more influenced on adult's way of thinking to get involve in socio-economics and politics arena through regular contact and visit parents at hometowns. Youth migrants have brought homes with experiences from the countries or cities they had been laboring in, with a dream of urbanization to make life better at the rural communities. Youth are working in the city of Phnom Penh or even at further afield, they are regularly connecting with their family members at home, taking time to return home to do farm work or other business activities (Planning 2012). Such connection has brought a new types of knowledge sharing between youth and parents to inspire family members and neighbors about what they have been experiencing at the cities or other country's politics (Mccargo 2014). Some are eager

to inform family members about the bitter experiences being treated unfairly or exploitatively from living in the city or abroad in Thailand, and are eager to address these issues at home (Chheang 2015).

Youth's employment perspective distanced from parents who are doing majority with farm work has not been well-integrated into most services and industry employment. Employment in agriculture sector has been decreasing from over 85% (late 1990s) to only 47% (2015) and the increasing employment in industry has been relatively small from 16% to 22% (NIS, 2015). Although the definition of the employment has been set different criteria according to some countries, it entails that the rate of youth unemployment is as low as around 3% according to the survey finding. Relatively youth employment in industry and garment sector is unskilled labor and a lot of youth has worked for own-account and laboring for family income generation. This type of employment is considered as vulnerable employment[4] which is relatively high.

Youth have become more influenced and distanced themselves in terms of decision making and choice from parents as they have the financing power. A study with 600 young migrant workers conducted in 2007 by the CDRI shows that young migrant workers, youth earned money mostly for their families, and not for themselves. 93.38% of the young migrants remitted their income to family at home. On average, about 1,012,400 riel (approx. USD 253 with current exchange rate) per year sent as remittance to youths' families at home (CDRI 2007). Although, there is no data to quantify the increase of remittances being sent home by 2019, with the current minimum wage increased to USD 170[5] per monthly for the garment and textile industry, remittance sending would be higher. Furthermore, the remittance sent home from overseas is increasingly contributing to the family. Workers in South Korea remitted with an estimated figure about USD 260 million last year (Hor 2017) and young migrant workers remitted from Thailand helped to increase household incomes in average from USD 369 (21,087 baht) to USD 1,019 (33,627 baht) per annual (Dilen 2010). This financing support is inevitably diverting from parents' domination over the decision and choices.

Youth dynamic change in terms of accessing to higher education, of better informed through technology, of being a financing power to parents, they are more diverted from parents' control, making a lot of more compromise in decision making. In the past, younger persons must keep quiet and chances are not given to express thoughts and ideas for decision making and have much less to argue with adult (Martin 1994), but these days, autonomy is given more to youth for decision-making for their own choices. According to figure 2, youth are given choice for own selection of certain issues encountered their decision. 53% of adult are given the autonomy to youth for education path and specific subject selection for their study at the tertiary education. Youth are also given more freedom of choices for future marriage, with 63% of adults accept that youth can make their own decisions regarding marriage. A lot of more freedom is given to youth in terms of democratic and political participation, with 93%

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[4] According to ILO 2009, vulnerable employment rate is a proportion of own-account and contributing family workers in total employment: https://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/download/mdg_en.pdf
[5] According to Reuters, Oct. 2018 Cambodia hikes textile workers' minimum wage, falls short of union demands: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-garment/cambodia-hikes-textile-workers-minimum-wage-falls-short-of-union-demands-idUSKCN1MF18B

of adults accepted that youth can make their own decision to cast a vote, no restriction of any preferred parties to vote for.

In the same vein, youth have been understood that they have more rights and open to choices for decision making and participation in social, economic and political development. 95% of youth think that they have the right to vote without tightened control and suppression from parents. In addition, 85% of youth have perceived that their decision to buy property such as a new phone, is their own decision, not to be made by their parents. Furthermore, employment selection is a decision owned by youth, with over 77% believe they have the right to make a decision for any employment perspective.
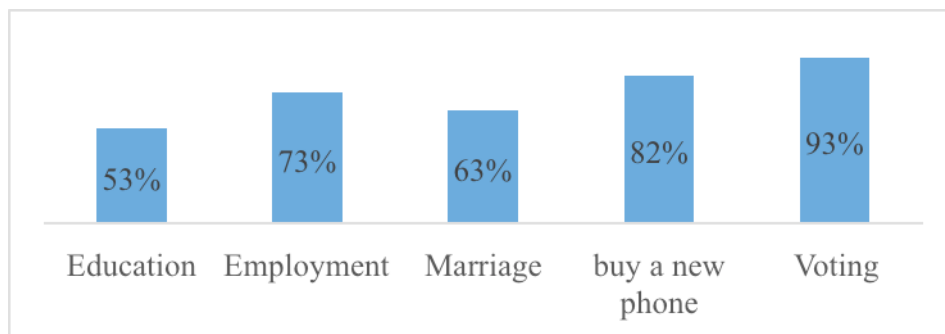
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Figure 2 Adult think youth should make their own decision
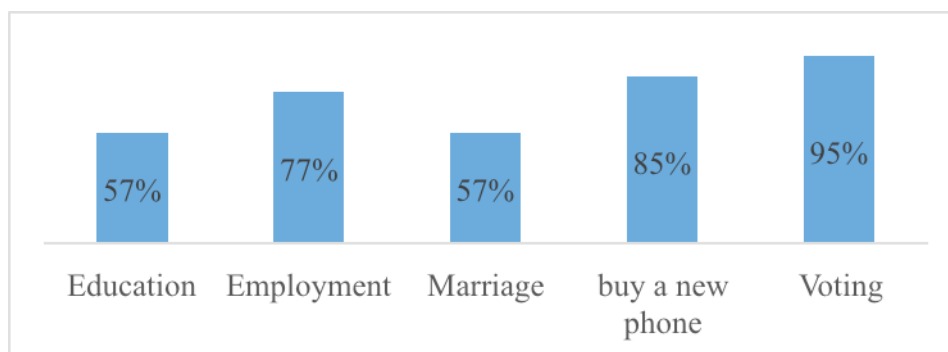
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Figure 3 Youth think they should make their own decision

Change between youth and State relations

The issues of youth and State relations is imparted when youth's expectations are not fulfilled. Youth have perceived that the State does not provide sufficient support to the poor people and most vulnerable groups. From the survey, 67% of youth agree that the State has insufficient mechanism and services to improved conditions of the poor. This is well resonated by a reporting findings from the WB's report (2019) that poverty has reduction continued, but the bottom 40% are doing less well than before (WB 2019). In the most significant case is that 58% of youth disagree with the fact that the State has created enough employment opportunity for the new generation. In light of this, youth have expressed many concerns surrounding political situation where it has been deteriorated over the couple of years, of which concern is the

conflict among the political parties that can be worsen with the capacity of economic performance.

Youth and State relations are not being close enough for local participation and development. Traditional/interpersonal relations and participation is not fully appraised for local development when youth are not perceived as being able to represent adult's views. The traditional/interpersonal relations have been shaped in a narrow space for youth to participate fully and in some cases have been restricted from parents or being not appreciated by local leaders for local participation and development. Most participation have been made through intermediaries such as youth associations and NGOs (Seiha.H, Mun V et al. 2014). From the survey in figure 5, only about one in three youth participated in village meetings for development and only 10% of youth attended in public forum, an event for the commune level. In contrast, youth have expressed ideas and fully participated online as traditional/interpersonal relations has been a constraint for them. So, youth is little to engage through traditionally mechanism for local participation and development.

Types of local community participation	Total
Village meetings	37%
Commune meetings	19%
Monitoring of commune projects	13%
School meetings	37%
Health care meetings	37%
Public forums	10%

N=398

Figure 4 Youth and adult community development participation

With the gap of interactions and challenges between youth and State and their challenges that are not fully addressed, Cambodian youth step to influence political stage through social media platform (Facebook). In the 2013, the election marked the most vibrant youth political participation yet, as social media was used for interactions between youth and other electorates and constituencies. Youth used Facebook to express their political thoughts, support their friends political expressions though "likes" and identify their political identity and socialization (Sovannara 2015). With a web-based survey with 105 Facebook users, it was found that Facebook was used for pre-and post-2013 national election debate, among youth, to some extent influencing other youth's voting behavior and even in protest (Thun 2014). This has resulted in a disappointing election in 2013 when Cambodian People Party (CPP) encountered a surprisingly loss of twenty-two of its sixty-eight parliamentary seats to the now-court-dissolved Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP)(Eng and Hughes 2017).

Besides election issues that youth have raised their concerns, expressing ideas online through the electronic technologies, youth gives priority to others that they are concerns of, from access to education, infrastructure, access to health, economy and job, environment, landlessness and corruption as their top priorities according to the 2019 CDRI's survey. Many youth activist groups including the Mother Nature have increasingly used the Facebook page to expose environmental destruction practices to

massive audiences and also to support brave young activists to continue advocate the Government and private companies to take accountable and transparent balances of development and environmental destruction[6]. Other young political activists are also continuing using online platform as means for socio-economic, environmental and political discussion and Facebook is popular to raise the issues as they are more disconnect to fear of redistribution (Chan 2015). Some of those opinions are quite an array of social and political issues: border disputes, the repression of political opposition, violations of traffic rules, the suffering of the weak, crime, land conflicts, poor public services, personalization of public property and so on (AsiaFoundation 2015). Youth are using Facebook to communicate among peer users and to communicate with politicians including the Prime Minister to appeal for the support, most importantly in the issues of land conflicts, and housing issues and some other pity cases (Vong and Hok 2018).

With the increasing popularity among young voters and adult alike, the Facebook page of the Cambodian Prime Minister has been established to create a channel for reaching out young people and adult alike to address some of the socio-economic, environmental issues in the virtual connection. The Prime Minister has used his Facebook account, responding to some critical comments and suggestions from the Facebook users. Vong and Hok (2018) stated that when the 2016 traffic law took into the effect to curb the prevalence road accidents within the country which had recorded a death toll of over 200 per year, it made some conflict to drivers due to higher cost induced. The required traffic law was to enforce by increasing cost of driving license for motor-drivers; Facebook users have appealed and asked the Prime Minister to intervene for the cost reduction of driving license. The Prime Minister ordered to reduce the cost of the driving license, as consequently, for facilitating costing driving licenses for all people and later the Prime Minister requested to amend the traffic law to waive driving requirement of the motorbike with the engine of 125 cc and under. Vong and Hok (2018) continued that some other related social issues have been raised through the Facebook to ask for the support from the Prime Minister for intervention; these are including the proposal of banning used cars for reducing the traffic congestion proposed by the Phnom Penh governor that went viral; the Prime Minister agreed with the fellow citizens and applied to continue the import of the used cars. The Prime Minister also paid the traffic fine when he was criticized in the Facebook of not wearing a helmet during driving a motorbike.

Vong and Hok (2018) have expressed less pessimistic of the approaches that have been addressed online by the Government. They stated:

...the influence of Facebooking could still be shallow and subject to political manipulation. Given the incentives for re-election, the so-called government responses can be viewed as merely low-hanging fruits picked skillfully to pacify voters. Most eye-catching perhaps are the Prime Minister's elaborate act and public statement in relation to paying the traffic fine. With such theatrical politics, the Prime Minister was appealing to people's aspirations for the rule of law, showing that just like ordinary people he is subject to law enforcement...p.230

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[6] http://www.mothernaturecambodia.org/home.html

On the other side of the intervention coin, the Government has adopted the draft Cyber-crime law to control online activities for determining education, prevention measures and combat all kinds of offense committed by computer system, using and developing technology. This is to avoid any destructive images against political development and ways of addressing pressing issues online in the contemporary politics and development. All publications of contents or websites that impact on security, incite, non-factual information undermined the government integrity, damaging moral and culture values and intending to threaten or commit crimes are subjected to be sentenced from one to three year and with the fine from two million Riels to six million Riels[7]. The terms for covering aspect for related offense activity online are including:

 "Content" refers to electronic form including text, images, graphics, animation, symbols, voices, and video p.4 in subsection 5 and "Website" refers to place on the Internet, which you can find any information p. 5 in subsection 10 of the draft law"

Anti-fake news and cyber-crime laws hav been pushed by the Prime Minister, recently for promulgation. He proposed these laws after his official account was hacked, so he intended to blocked media platform afterwards, but later acknowledged that the social media platform function is essential and won't shut it down. However, the Prime Minister requested for surveillance scrutiny of any activities that go against the law[8].

"I will not stop Facebook here, I will not allow such a thing to happen because our people need...Obviously, we receive benefits from Facebook but there are some users who are using it in a negative way....we need to punish those who express comment to break law and to educate users progressively over posting comments and take some legal action too...."

These have been perceived as ways forward to control online activities. As a consequence of the control of the online activities, many have been arrested over use of their expression that has impacted on the integrity of the Government[9].

"In one case earlier this year a man was arrested on his wedding day for calling the government "authoritarian" on Facebook, and in another a refugee was extradited from Thailand for throwing a shoe at a ruling party billboard in a video posted online...".

In such tightened control online situation, according to the results of a five-week poll reaching out to one million young people from 160 countries conducted by United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Cambodian youth are in danger of online violence, cyberbullying and digital harassment. Majority of the Cambodian youth between 15 to 25 years are more easily to be in danger in the forms of ruthless and void that they are continuing to exposed to online harassment[10]. The report stated:

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[7] https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/37516/Draft-Law-On-CyberCrime_Englishv1.pdf
[8] https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50583926/pm-pushes-for-anti-fake-news-law/
[9] https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/freedom-expression-online-cambodia-stifled-laws
[10] https://theaseanpost.com/article/cambodias-youth-are-danger

"...Cambodia and among the 160 countries findings from the poll and youth talks were that 85.7 percent of young Cambodians aged between 15 and 25 years are in danger of online violence, cyberbullying and digital harassment."

Conclusion

The triple relations between youth, adult and State have been changing in the contemporary politics and development. There have been varies of causes that have triggered those change of interactions between those three parties. Cambodian youth these days have evolved from the tightened control of their parents for decision-making, resulting from their education attainments, crucial role and responsibilities for family income generation, and experiences from offshores to where they had been migrated. The change of relations between youth and State have been seen as experiences of both traditional interactions through meeting gatherings that have been more unpraised and youth has loosened with such interest of interactions. Given that technology rising, youth have turned to social medial platform for communicating with the State and influence their policy decision. Such a move could bring more reaping benefit for policy implementation and development to address Cambodia youth's concerns over the socio-economic, environmental, and political development. A new draft law of cyber-crime and censorship with the online activities, however, would contrastingly hinder such progressive participation of young people in the online activities. Finally, a closer attention to youth needs is required for improving youth and State relations. A critical comment from this is to create a social media platform which is friendly to all types of users in order to address the young generation's needs. The creating social media platform can open to improving and increasing trust in public services through closing gap of interactions between youth and State. In addition, traditional/interpersonal interactions need to be improved to ensure that youth have been inclusive for the local participation and development.

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