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Understanding trends in authoritarian populism by examining the crackdown on the Cambodian free press

Treating ‘democratic/authoritarian’ and ‘liberal/illiberal’ as oppositional categories can obscure the pockets of liberalism and democratic norms folded into authoritarian regimes. These pockets can provide temporary spaces for emancipatory politics and can also be brutally shut down. Cambodia has long been considered unique in the Southeast Asia region for a relatively free press, but in 2017 the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) launched a coordinated attack to repress opposition in the lead-up to the country’s national election. The government closed independent media outlets and stripped the opposition party of their parliamentary seats. With no credible opposition, the CPP went on to win every seat in the National Assembly, ensuring that Prime Minister Hun Sen retained his status as the world’s longest ruling current Prime Minister.

Our study focuses on Cambodia’s crackdown on the free press to draw attention to the various scales and spaces in which authoritarianism is produced, enacted and imagined. Renewed scholarly attention to authoritarianism is challenging the tendency to view the phenomenon through a state-based lens. There are also recent calls in agrarian studies to understand the media’s emancipatory potential and its use as a structure of oppression. Our research contributes to this effort by examining media-based practices to produce both structures of oppression and emancipatory potentials. Print journalism, radio broadcasts, social media and text messaging are places and scales at which neat binaries are disrupted in practice.

By analyzing data from long-standing fieldwork in rural Cambodia alongside recent interviews with Cambodian journalists who lost their jobs in the 2017 crackdown, we show that authoritarian practices are not just closures of institutions and people. They are also closures of the imagination: foreclosures of alternative imaginings of subjectivity and political arrangements. We argue that the Cambodian state’s crackdown on the free press is part of the ongoing transformation of authoritarian populism that has reduced the space for rural collective action. Cracking down on the free press and co-opting social media spaces appears to be part of a shift to draw support away from oppositional politics and to silence rural resistance to the enrichment of well-connected elites. By ousting independent journalists who illuminated rural struggles, this period spells heightened extraction—without apology—from rural areas.

For the Cambodian journalists whom we interviewed, these political shifts signal a ‘darkness’ brought on not only by the material loss of the news outlet, but also the loss of a democratic imaginary. Journalists



*Hun Sen and CPP election posters on a shopfront in Phnom Penh (2013).
Laura Schoenberger photograph*

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pined for a democracy that was never fully realized but had seemed possible in the post-Khmer Rouge era. The imaginary of press freedom was both something abstract that these journalists strove towards, and something they struggled to enact in their everyday work as they sought to widen small spaces of openness in risky circumstances. Journalists were subjected to intimidation, violence and oppression even before the crackdown. But after 2017, state-affiliated media proliferated alongside enhanced state surveillance capabilities and repressive laws, making the *possibility* that the country is transitioning to democratic ideals, like a free press, ever less likely. It also introduced practical hurdles to practicing journalistic principles: If the opposition is outlawed, then who do you turn to as a source for another perspective to balance the story?

What became clear from talking with journalists in the aftermath of the crackdown was that the *possibility* of a democratic space was at the heart of the matter. This was important also for the way that rural people use the media to get their message out. Contacting local journalists and making connections with independent outlets were key strategies in organizing against land grabbing, logging and other resource struggles and injustices. Print and broadcast media sometimes brought hope through hearing other struggles, and at other times, as one farmer explained, "I get so mad when I listen to the radio, I want to throw it away". Radio broadcasts helped people to assemble a view of the stakes and strategies of struggles nationwide. The stories brought context; the means to envision one's place in a bigger picture.

This research also challenges optimistic views of social media. The shift in Cambodia's authoritarian populism is taking shape online. The ruling party harnessed social media to enhance populist rhetoric while simultaneously restricting its use through enhanced surveillance. These practices disrupt global narratives about the emancipatory potential of the internet.

We are writing this brief in COVID-19 lockdown, as many governments pass state of emergency declarations to keep people safe. These laws protect public health, but they can also be used to further authoritarian closure. Cambodia's new state of emergency declaration risks intensifying the CPP's suppression of media and civil society, imposes draconian penalties on those who disobey, and lacks a sunset clause. At this moment, research that shows how authoritarianism takes hold urges us to be aware of practices that further the closure of emancipatory space.

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