

Cambodia's Internet May Soon Be Like China's: State-Controlled

Under a new decree, all web traffic will be routed through a government portal. Rights groups say a crackdown on digital expression is about to get worse.

By Charles McDermid

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — The day Kea Sokun was arrested in Cambodia, four men in plainclothes showed up at his photography shop near Angkor Wat and carted him off to the police station. Mr. Kea Sokun, who is also a popular rapper, had released two songs on YouTube, and the men said they needed to know why he'd written them.

"They kept asking me: 'Who is behind you? What party do you vote for?'" Mr. Kea Sokun said. "I told them, 'I have never even voted, and no one controls me.'"

The 23-year-old artist, who says his songs are about everyday struggles in Cambodia, was sentenced to 18 months in an overcrowded prison after a judge found him guilty of inciting social unrest with his lyrics. His case is part of a crackdown in which dozens have been sent to jail for posting jokes, poems, pictures, private messages and songs on the internet.

The ramped-up scrutiny reflects an increasingly restrictive digital environment in Cambodia, where a new law will allow the authorities to monitor all web traffic in the country. Critics say that the decree puts Cambodia on a growing list of countries that have embraced China's authoritarian model of internet surveillance, from Vietnam to Turkey, and that it will deepen the clash over the future of the web.



“They kept asking me: ‘Who is behind you? What party do you vote for?’” the rapper Kea Sokun said of his arrest over YouTube videos. He spent a year in prison. Cindy Liu for The New York Times

Cambodia's National Internet Gateway, set to begin operating on Feb. 16, will send all internet traffic — including from abroad — through a government-run portal. The gateway, which is mandatory for all service providers, gives state regulators the means to “prevent and disconnect all network connections that affect national income, security, social order, morality, culture, traditions and customs.”

Government surveillance is already high in Cambodia. Each ministry has a team that monitors the internet. Offending content is reported to an internet crime unit in the Ministry of Interior, the center of the country's robust security apparatus. Those responsible can be charged with incitement and sent to prison.

But rights groups say that the new law will make it even easier for the authorities to monitor and punish online content, and that the recent arrests are meant to further intimidate citizens into self-censorship in a country where free speech is enshrined in the Constitution.

“The authorities are emboldened by China as an example of an authoritarian state that gives Cambodia political cover, new technology and financial resources,” said Sophal Ear, a dean at the Thunderbird School of Global Management at Arizona State University whose family escaped the Khmer Rouge, the murderous regime that seized power in Cambodia in 1975.



Riverside Park in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. The government will soon have the power to monitor all Web traffic in the country. Cindy Liu for The New York Times

“The National Internet Gateway is merely centralizing what has been a decentralized system of control over Cambodia’s internet,” he said. “The outcome will be to crush what little remains of freedom of expression online.”

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The Cambodian authorities have defended the decree as essential for peace and security, dismissing allegations of censorship or any notion that freedom of speech is under threat. “There is a free press in Cambodia and freedom on the internet,” said Phay Siphon, the chief government spokesman. “We encourage people to use the internet, up until it becomes incitement.”

Mr. Phay Siphon accused rights groups of “spreading paranoia” and described United Nations experts who have criticized the law as “working part-time jobs.” He said he felt sorry for the young people who had been arrested because they were not speaking for themselves.

“With freedom comes responsibility,” he said. “We warn them. We lecture them, make them sign documents, then the next week they post the same things, without taking the responsibility to maintain peace and stability.”



Phay Siphon, the chief government spokesman in Cambodia, during an interview in November. He and other officials have defended the decree as essential for peace and security. Cindy Liu for The New York Times

Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has been in power since 1985 and shown great zeal when publicly condemning his political rivals, appears eager to transfer his opprobrium to the digital era.

When a former monk and activist posted a disparaging poem about the loss of the nation's forests on the prime minister's Facebook page, Mr. Hun Sen described the act as "extremist" and ordered the police to hunt the monk down. He was arrested in October.

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In August, a former agriculture professor was sentenced to 18 months in prison for making jokes on Facebook about requiring chickens to wear anti-Covid masks. He was charged with incitement and with defaming the prime minister, as well as the minister of agriculture.

Weeks later, a farmer, frustrated by the government's failed promise to subsidize longan crops while the pandemic kept borders closed to exports, posted a video of tons of his annual harvest going to rot. He was sentenced to 10 months in prison.

Of more than 30 arrests made over digital content since 2020, the most publicized one involved an autistic 16-year-old who was released in November. The teenager, Kak Sovann Chhay, had been jailed for comments he made in a chat group on Telegram, the private messaging app.



Supporters of Kak Sovann Chhay waiting for his release. His father, who belongs to an outlawed political party, was also jailed, for criticizing the prime minister on Facebook. Cindy Liu for The New York Times

His father, a senior member of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party, which has been outlawed, was in prison at the same time. He had been jailed in 2020 for criticizing Mr. Hun Sen on Facebook, where the prime minister has more than 13 million followers.

Internet service providers have asked the authorities to provide more clarity about the gateway. Meta, Facebook's parent company, said in a statement that it had "joined with other stakeholders in sharing our feedback on this new law with the Cambodian government, and expressing our strong support for a free and open internet."

Last week, three local journalists were charged and detained for incitement over a report on a land dispute that they posted on Facebook.



Prum Chantha, Kak Sovann Chhay's mother, cried as she performed a blessing ceremony for him after his release. Cindy Liu for The New York Times

"We're 35 days away from D-Day, and no status update has been delivered by relevant authorities or the private sector itself. That said, we weren't expecting any public transparency as to the implementation of this," Naly Pilorge, director of the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, said this month.

"In the past, the government has tried to block content by requesting private-sector I.S.P.s to remove it, with mixed success," she said. "But the National Internet Gateway gives them a much more powerful tool to crack down on free expression and dissent."

In one bizarre move in September, the prime minister "Zoom-bombed" an online meeting for members of the Cambodian National Rescue Party. He took to Facebook to explain the intrusion: "This entry was just to give a warning message to the rebel group to be aware that Mr. Hun Sen's people are everywhere."

San Mala, a senior advocacy officer with the Cambodian Youth Network, said activists and rights groups were already using coded language to communicate across online messaging platforms, knowing that the authorities had been emboldened by the decree.

"As a civil society organization, we are concerned about this internet gateway law because we fear that our work will be subjected to surveillance or our conversations will be eavesdropped on or they will be able to attend online meetings with us without invitation or permission," said Mr. San Mala, 28.

Rights groups say a new law will make it easier for the authorities to monitor and punish online content in Cambodia, even though free speech is enshrined in the Constitution. *Cindy Liu for The New York Times*

Sopheap Chak, the executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said the timing of the new law was unsettling, given upcoming elections.

“There is a real risk that the National Internet Gateway will be used to block and censor dissenting opinions online,” she said. “This will hinder Cambodian citizens’ ability to make an informed decision on which candidate they deem to be the fittest to rule the country.”

Mr. Kea Sokun, the rapper, was released in October after serving 12 months in prison. Six months of his original 18-month sentence were suspended to keep him in line, he said, a reminder that he is “not legally free yet.”

“Khmer Land,” one of the songs that got him arrested, now has more than 4.4 million views on YouTube, and Mr. Kea Sokun is already working on his next album.

“I’m not angry, but I know what happened to me is unfair,” he said. “The government made an example out of me to scare people who talk about social issues.” He said he could have had his sentence reduced if he had apologized, but he refused.

“I won’t say I’m sorry,” Mr. Kea Sokun said, “and I never will.”

Soth Ban and Meas Molika contributed reporting.