5. Economic crisis and the panopticon of the digital virus in Cambodia

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Within Southeast Asia, Cambodia is the most impoverished nation, notwithstanding an economy reliant on garment and manufacturing industries, tourism, and agriculture. The country's garment and manufacturing sector, especially the garment and footwear industry, emerged in the early 1990s after the first general elections organised by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia. The United States and the European Union supported Cambodia's export-driven economy through their Generalised Systems of Preferences and other trade schemes. The EU, for example, allowed Cambodia to export duty-free and quota-free to its market from 2001 under the Everything but Arms (EBA) scheme. These policies boosted Cambodia's garment sector such that, as of 2019, it employed about 600,000 Cambodians, most of whom were women from rural areas. With the support of the garment industry and other industries, Cambodia managed to significantly reduce poverty and transform its economy to become a lower-middle-income country in 2016. From 2017 to 2019, Cambodia exported on average €4 billion (European Commission 2020) and US$4 billion (United States Census Bureau 2021) of apparel products per year to the EU and US markets, respectively. As such, the manufacturing industry accounted for about 10% of Cambodia's GDP (World Bank 2020).

While these forms of support were significant to the country and its people, the Cambodian government's respect for human rights, particularly freedom of association and freedom of speech, and democracy in general has been dismal, as the country has leaned towards authoritarianism, as evidenced by the dissolution of the most prominent opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), in 2017 as

well as the ongoing intimidation and spurious arrests of human rights and environmental defenders, all of which restricted the space of civil society organisations. These restrictions led the EU to partially withdraw its EBA scheme with Cambodia in February 2020, harming workers in related sectors. Many factories were forced to shut down without proper indemnities for the employees.

Coinciding with the imposition of import tariffs by the EU, Cambodia's economy, especially its garment and manufacturing, was doubly punished by the emergence of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which spread across the world. Not only did the pandemic severely disrupt the global supply chain and markets of garment and manufacturing industries, leaving many jobless, but it also affected the entire country's socio-economic conditions. The government's lack of proper remedial measures for the impacts of the pandemic sparked dissatisfaction, which in turn led to activism. Amid the country's shift towards authoritarianism, as seen in the 2018 election, and the restrictions imposed by the government to contain the virus, many were forced to stay at home and were thus compelled to subscribe to digital platforms for study, work, communication, and activism. This pushed those who were affected by the EU's sanctions and the pandemic to carry out online activities to advocate for better solutions rather than stage offline (on-street) protests.

In this chapter, I seek to understand online activities and activism during the pandemic and examine the adverse consequences of avoiding offline activities over the same period. This chapter argues that the endeavour, either by the state or individuals, to avoid offline activities to contain the virus adversely induced a new virus – digital surveillance – that infiltrated everyone's digital devices. More than the panopticon of COVID-19, the symptoms of which are easily observable, this new form of digital virus embodies itself in every smartphone device without showing any symptoms. While social media was a COVID-19-free platform for ordinary citizens and activists to connect and express their concerns during the pandemic, it became an invisible hand of surveillance of the authoritarian ruling system.

This chapter is written based on my ongoing observation of Cambodia's sociopolitical and technological developments, employing digital ethnography and collecting data from relevant social media pages and profiles. The quantitative data presented in this chapter was acquired from Google, focusing on the 'news' media outlets it has captured.

The remainder of this chapter begins with a discussion about conceptualising digital media in the context of surveillance as a new form of digital virus, an expression of the pandemic that has been less familiar to us. It then illustrates how COVID-19 induced Cambodians to subscribe to social media and digital devices before providing evidence on how the latter could strengthen an authoritarian surveillance system.

The virus and digital technology panopticon

The digital community has been recognised as a modern tool of human development and evolution. Many have been impressed by this evolution, as digital devices can process data and circulate images and voices from one community to another. Kittler (2010, p.11) has argued that 'machines take tasks – drawing, writing, seeing, hearing, word-processing, memory and even knowing – that once were thought unique to humans and often perform them better'. Given this capability, digital devices like smartphones and cloud devices have become modern panoptic tools incubated by our everyday lives. These devices and the internet have been replacing our basic needs. Drawing on Foucault's (2012) conception of the panoptic prison cell, I argue that these devices gradually ingrain themselves in our bodies and minds without warning; health applications are exemplary in this sense. It is a virus that affects us without giving us symptoms. With our unintentional consent, this digital virus has extracted our personal data for buyers' commercial and political purposes. Zuboff (2019) has rightly illustrated that access to the digital community exposes oneself to significant risks. At risk is the loss or co-optation of privacy rights, rendering personal data (our private space, in essence) to corporate giants. Having submitted to machine learning, it has been increasingly difficult to hold the state and politicians accountable, particularly through activism. More often than not, for the sake of profit, the corporate capitalist media have allowed surveillance and authoritarian states to use their data to gain legitimate power, as in the US presidential and UK parliamentary elections, and to censor opponents.

Drawing on how activists and the state interact in China, MacKinnon (2010) has introduced the concept of 'networked authoritarianism', which is a political tactic that creates selective social openings for transparency but at the same time monitors and stifles dissent (He and Warren 2011). This networked authoritarianism in the digital era is framed by the notion of a networked society whose key social structures

and activities are organised and linked electronically (Castells 2010). The networked authoritarian Chinese government, for instance, allows people to use the internet to submit grievances or unjust activities, but the government also monitors who reports or submits the grievances. In China, only specific applications or types of social media platforms are allowed to be used, and this makes it easier for the ruling regime to scrutinise and surveil users in order to curb outrageous dissent. The use of these digital communication technologies, therefore, has undesirable side effects, one of which is exposure to the surveillance system (Howard and Hussain 2013), a critical concern for digital activism in non-democratic political systems that appear to have adopted the Chinese authoritarian style of panoptic surveillance, of which Cambodia is an example.

Cambodia's online community and activism amid the pandemic

The foregoing theorisation of how digital communication and technologies carry risks has been eminent in the experiences of Cambodia and other countries during the pandemic. Following the government's instructions not to mobilise or make physical contact, especially in education and offices, the pandemic forced millions of Cambodians to subscribe to digital devices and communication platforms. By September 2020, about 67% of Cambodians (11.28 million of about 16 million) had subscribed to Facebook (NapoleonCat 2020), making this social media site a popular means of communication among Cambodian people, particularly the youth. This figure had climbed from about 9.73 million subscribers before the pandemic, in December 2019, only gradually increasing to 9.78 million users by January 2020, by which time COVID-19 had not spread widely in the country. With the pandemic starting to affect the country in early February 2020, the number of subscribers surged rapidly, to 10.52 million in March and 10.95 million in May the same year (see Figure 5.1). Young adults and children were among the new subscribers, with an age distribution of 7.8% ages 13–17, 31.4% ages 18–24, and 47.5% 25–34 as of March 2020 (NapoleonCat 2021). Likewise, the number of smartphone subscribers also increased, as these devices were required to access social media sites such as Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube. ITU (2021) reported that the number of mobile cellular phone subscribers in Cambodia increased from 19.42 million in 2018 to 21.42 million in 2019. Compared

Figure 5.1. Facebook users in Cambodia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (millions)
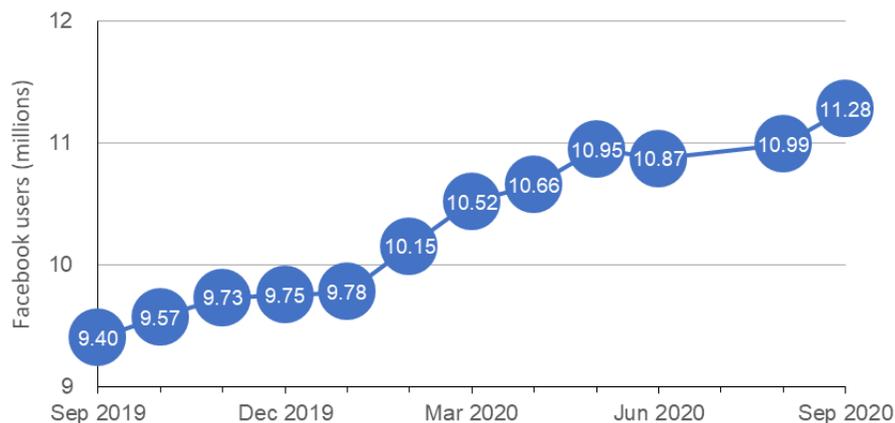

Source: Author's compilation from NapoleonCat (2020).

with a total population of 16 million, this data suggests that many Cambodians could afford at least two phones (Young 2021a). Given the low quality of education, the higher percentage of young subscribers raised critical concerns for data and privacy issues as well as the users' rights. These young adults and children subscribed to the internet and social media for online education, watching livestreamed lectures or pre-recorded video instructions. Based on my field observations, albeit under the supervision of their parents or guardians, many of these users were known to be addicted to YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and online games and exposed to inappropriate content instead of accessing teaching materials.

Not only did the pandemic compel ordinary Cambodians to go online; it also negatively affected Cambodia's economy (coinciding with the partial withdrawal of the EBA programme). Coupled with the decline of purchase orders in the apparel and footwear industries, Cambodia's GDP growth in 2020 was predicted to be between –1% and –2.9%, with about 1.76 million jobs at risk (World Bank, 2020, p.3). The World Bank (2020) emphasised that the poverty rate in the country was to increase by 20% in 2020. Some factories closed down, as they were affected by either the impact of COVID-19 on global supply chains or the withdrawal of the EU's EBA scheme. This raised concerns for affected populations, especially garment and manufacturing workers, who then sought government intervention and assistance. Given the government's restrictions on physical movement, the ability

Figure 5.2. Online news reports on Cambodia related to selected search terms before and during the COVID-19 pandemic[1]
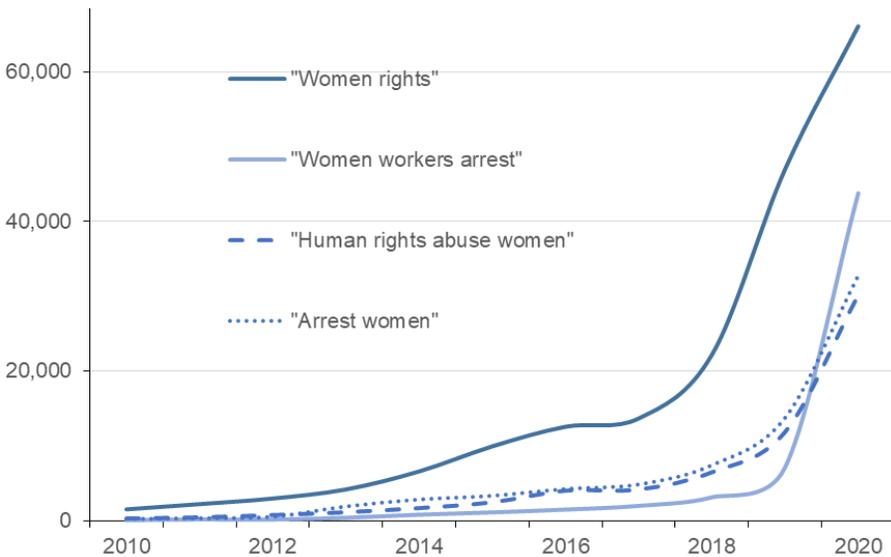
Source: Author's collection of data from Google Search.

to lobby the government and concerned stakeholders was limited to on-line activities. Workers and other advocates began to use social media platforms including Facebook to express grievances, such as a lack of indemnities (as factories were shut down) and dissatisfaction with the government's failure to remedy job losses and cuts due to COVID-19. Coming from either individuals or media outlets, news on job losses and cuts and people's dissatisfaction with government measures were widely observed in Google searches.

As I traced the development of news on women workers on Google (see Figure 5.2), I found that results for 'women rights Cambodia' were often reported by local and international media outlets: the number of mentions increased from 47,000 in 2019 to 66,100 in 2020. While digital and social media have become platforms for disgruntled women to frame and amplify their concerns to the public, it has not been an ideal solution. Querying the term 'women workers arrest' in Cambodia, I found that the frequency of the term exploded from 7,170 times in 2019 to 43,800 times in 2020. This signified that many women work-ers or activists were arrested, detained, or harassed by authorities. For instance, one female worker, who was a member of a union, was arrested because of a post on Facebook that criticised her employer for

dismissing 88 workers without following government guidelines and instructions not to cut jobs but rather reduce workers' wages (Kelly and Grant 2020). Following her post, the employer who saw the post decided to re-employ the workers, and she immediately deleted her post from Facebook, but the employer still filed a complaint against her, accusing her of creating fake news to defame the company and buyers. The ability to notice who was posting what or putting news on Facebook from their smartphone has indicated the effectiveness of both private companies and government surveillance systems. Both companies and the government may have worked together to censor online activities. The government's Anti-Cybercrime Office has been playing an important role in this effort. In one instance, the prime minister of Cambodia, who had been in power for more than three decades (Young 2021b), claimed that smartphones allowed the government to track and trace anyone effectively (Young 2021c). He claimed, 'If I want to take action against you, we will get [you] within seven hours at the most' (Doyle 2016). For anyone who dares to speak out against the supreme leaders or the government, the consequence is predictable based on that statement.

While many Cambodians moved their activities online to contain and prevent the spread of the virus, political activists, environmental and human rights defenders, workers, and protesters also resorted to online activities. As they went online, they submitted to a new form of authority that I call a 'surveillance virus', which infects users at all times. As in Figure 5.3, it appears that the pandemic caused a surge in spurious arrests of political activists, environmental and human rights defenders, workers, and protesters. The accumulation of the arrest in 2019 and 2020 was induced by two important reasons. First, authorities arrested those activists with whom they were still disgruntled even two years after the 2017 dissolution of the opposition party (CNRP) prior to the 2018 elections. The election allowed the ruling party to take control of all national assembly seats and Prime Minister Hun Sen to remain in power (Young 2021b). Second, the arrests were made in response to those who supported the attempt of CNRP leader Sam Rainsy, who had lived in exile since 2016, to return to Cambodia in 2019. As of September 2020, the number of people arrested by authorities had increased to 55, alarming the international community's concerns over the country's tendency to practise authoritarianism during the pandemic. In tandem with the preceding reasons, the arrests in 2020 were linked to criticisms made by activists and citizens on how the government handled and contained the pandemic. By March 2021, as

Figure 5.3. Activists arrested in Cambodia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic
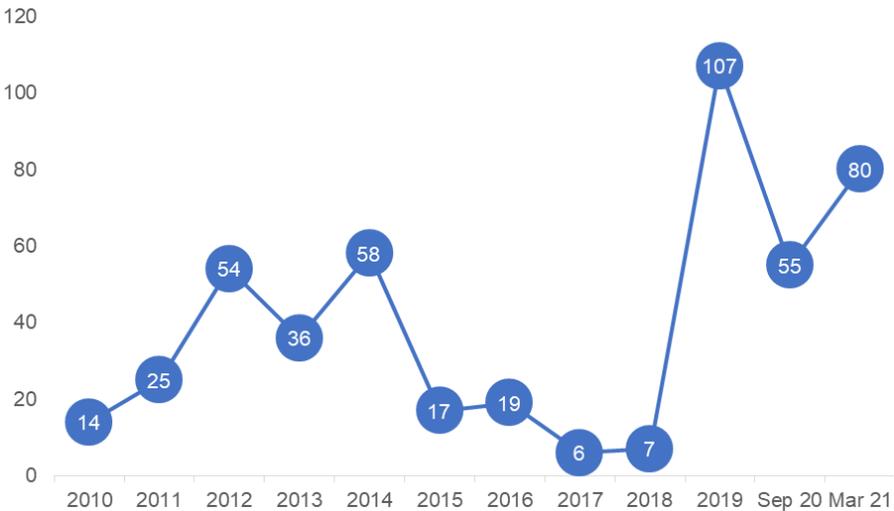
Source: modified from Young and Heng (2021).

many as 80 activists and ordinary citizens had already been arrested or detained for criticising and expressing their opinions about the efficacy of the Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccines (Sinopharm and Sinovac) that were preferred and being rolled out by the government. The government claimed that they were arrested because their opinions and statements (through text and video) on Facebook and TikTok 'gravely affect[ed] social security' (Finney 2021). Some of the arrests were publicly reported by the Facebook page of the government's Anti-Cyber Crime Office (ACCO). The ACCO was the surveillance unit actively censoring and screening online news and posts, including 'fake' news, on social media. The arrests were enabled by the 'networked authoritarianism' highlighted by MacKinnon (2010) in China: the government allowed online grievance submissions but tackled critical ones, as they undermined the ruling regime's authority and legitimacy. Cambodian activists' and citizens' critiques of how the government handled the pandemic, socio-economic issues, and other social issues during the crisis have been subject to scrutiny and surveillance. Social media-mediated devices have become invisible tools of the ruling system.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how COVID-19 not only affected Cambodia's economy but also pushed many Cambodians to go online,

subscribing to digital platforms. Digital media platforms have been believed to help contain the spread of COVID-19, but such endeavours apparently allowed users to become infected by a new form of virus, digital surveillance, whose symptoms cannot be diagnosed or known by users, only by the government. This digital virus has surrounded users, placing them in the panoptic prison cell of the surveillance system. The users only realise that they are in the cell when the observers or guards (the government, in this instance) take action against them, as illustrated by the women workers and activists in the present study and beyond. This new type of virus tightened the authoritarian surveillance system to effectively monitor the antagonistic behaviour of citizens and activists that could undermine the ruling system's legitimacy.

Note

1. I used key terms to search on Google and classified the results of the search by year. To ensure that all search results were about Cambodia, 'Cambodia' was always added to individual terms when searched on Google: 'Women workers arrest Cambodia', for example. These search results were limited to 'news' rather than 'all' results in the Google search engine. I then grouped these results by year of publication.

Acknowledgements

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