

Cambodia's young show courage, desire for change

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Cambodia's general election last Sunday saw significant change in the way Cambodian young people view politics and their society. To be sure, the considerably reduced number of Cambodian People's Party's seats shows a groundswell of their deep dissatisfaction over poverty, nepotism, corruption and land grabbing that the current government has failed to tackle.

With the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) winning 55 out of the 123 seats, it is most likely that the current ruling party must work together with the opposition to form a legitimate government.

As a young voter, I was really moved by young people's willingness to actively participate and show their courage for the first time.

During the 30-day electoral campaigns, hundreds of thousands of youth took to the streets in Phnom Penh and used social media to express their thoughts and convictions without fear. I suddenly felt empowered to discuss political issues in depth freely, knowing I would no longer be alone doing that.

Like other young people in Cambodia, I believe I can now make a difference for my country. I voted this year with the hope that my vote counted and that it would finally bring change. It was wonderful to be part of the excitement and rising strength among my fellow young voters, something that I did not see back in 2008.

I asked myself what took us so long to really believe in our right to contribute to our society and to realise our power to bring change by uniting our force.

Much of our fear diminished after having freely participated in political rallies and as volunteer observers at polling stations ensure that the vote counting was fair, free and transparent.

I dare say that the opposition is credited for having engaged young people in their political campaigns and for championing the use of social media in political advocacy to spread information and attract other young voters. Members of the ruling party have also used Facebook as a platform to do the same.

Facebook was earlier a place where a lot of young Cambodians went to seek entertainment. But Cambodian Facebook users, mostly young people from 18 to 35 years old, have gradually embraced this social network to share and receive information not usually seen in the mainstream media which is considered censored.

As of 2013, Facebook users make up of about 5% of the 15 million population. The number shows a positive sign of an emerging e-democracy while real democracy still has a long way to go.

Since 2010 when Facebook became popular in Cambodia, videos and pictures of protests, crimes, and violence have been widely shared and circulated to broaden people's political horizons. By 2013, Facebook has become a level playing field for political debates from all sides.

When people went to polling stations, they could not find their names. Others discovered that somebody else had already voted in their name. Double registrations were also common. Also, voters could wash off the ink on the finger with different techniques. The videos of these voting irregularities were posted on Facebook and quickly became viral.

For older voters, it is understandable that the continuation of relative peace and stability was so important to them. But 1.5 million out of 9.6 registered voters this year were young people under 30 who have no memory of the Khmer Rouge genocide between 1975 and 1979 or the Vietnamese occupation.

Some people might say that it is a bit too early to judge the impacts of social media on Cambodian politics, that we should give it a bit more time to fully understand the phenomenon.

Yet it cannot be denied that there has been an active participation of Cambodian young people on the internet and social media. And, they are hungry for change in their lives and that of their next generation.

It does not matter who has won this election. Despite election irregularities, younger voters have overcome fear to make their voices heard through the ballots. And they want change.

On another note, the anti-Vietnamese rhetoric by the opposition does not sit well with a lot of young intellectuals who do not see it as one of the solutions for the future. It is time for the young generation to start questioning their leaders and to demand they address issues rather than blame others for our failure to tackle our own problems.

With the ongoing debates online and offline and the maturing of Cambodian politics, Cambodia will be better off if the two parties work together, not for own vested interests, but for the country as a whole. The violence that broke out at a polling station on the election day was just a sign showing that people especially young Cambodians' voices are not to be ignored.

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