7th Cambodia General Elections: Internet Censorship Monitoring

Cambodia's 7th national election was held on 23 July 2023. During this time, civil societies, journalists, and activists monitored internet censorship to ensure that digital rights and freedom of expression were being upheld.

Picture1: Polling Station

1. Key Findings

During the 7th Cambodian national election held on 23 July 2023, a total of 53 websites from different categories were monitored using the Open Observatory Network Interference (OONI) tool. The websites belonged to the following categories: News (21 websites), social media (6 websites), Human Rights Issues (14 websites), Social Networks (8 websites), and Government, Election, or Politician (4 websites).

Only the websites in the News and Human Rights category were found to be blocked, particularly those belonging to independent media. Specifically, 9 out of 21 websites from the News category and 1 out of 14 websites from the Human Rights category had been blocked by the internet service providers (ISPs) using the methods of DNS and TCP blocking. The independent news outlets with blocked websites were Radio Free Asia (English and Khmer websites), Voice of Democracy (English and Khmer websites), the Kamnotra database run by the Cambodia News, the Cambodia Daily, and Monoroom News.

2. Background

During the 2018 elections, the government ordered ISPs to block at least 15 news websites.[1] Learning from the 2018 events, we monitored internet censorship during the 7th Cambodian election, which was held on 23 July 2023, as there was a likelihood that websites publishing election-related content, particularly those belonging to independent news media, would be censored during the period leading up to the polling day and afterward, especially if the administration changed.

In this report, we discuss the methodology used to conduct monitoring and our findings, as well as the conclusions and recommendations.

3. Methodology

OONI Probe tools were used to monitor for internet censorship on websites, social media apps (Messager, WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram), and VPN tech tools (Raise Up, Psiphon), as well as perform bandwidth testing. From 1 July 2023 to 15 August 2023, we selected and tested specific websites related to the elections using OONI Probe and OONI Run.

4. Timeline of Internet Censorship During the Elections

During the election period, the government ordered internet service providers to block a public database and the websites and social media pages of several independent media outlets.[2]

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[1] *Cambodia Adrift | Government Confirms Blocking 15 Independent News Sites Over Poll "Disruption."* (2018, July 30). Cambodia Adrift | Government Confirms Blocking 15 Independent News Sites Over Poll "Disruption." https://projects.voanews.com/cambodia-election-2018/english/feature/government-confirm-blocking-fifteen-independent-news-sites-over-poll-disruption.html

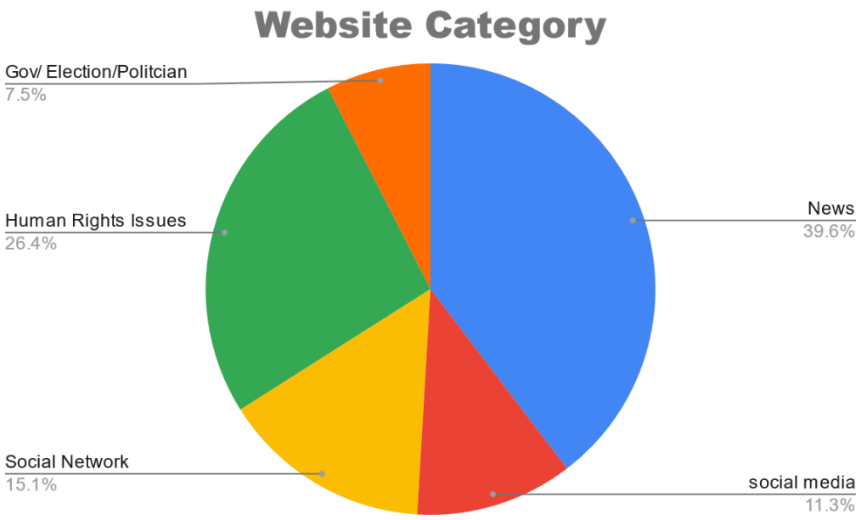
[2] https://cambojanews.com/government-orders-internet-providers-to-block-media-outlets-kamnotra-database/

- On 12 July 2023, the Telecommunications Regulator of Cambodia issued a document that sought to cut off access from inside the country to the Cambodia Daily, Radio Free Asia, and the newly launched public database Kamnotra, which is run by the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM). An unofficial translation of the document stated that the media and database had "broadcast information to make confusion, affect the government's honor and prestige, and failed to fulfill the operating conditions of the Information Ministry."
- On 13 February 2023, the Khmer and English websites of VOD were blocked by ISPs. The CCIM and VOD websites were also blocked by ISPs. This was done just minutes after Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen shut down one of the country's last independent news publications, and internet service providers began blocking the outlet's websites.
- Service providers were ordered to block access to the Instagram and Twitter accounts of the Cambodia Daily, the Twitter account of Kamnotra, and the YouTube channel of the Cambodia Daily.
- The document also referenced a letter, dated 11 July 2023, from the Information Ministry, whose spokesperson Meas Sophorn confirmed to CamboJA over Telegram that the ministry had initiated the order.
- Regarding the Kamnotra database, Sophorn stated that "[We] found that this website operated as a newspaper but did not fulfill its obligations in accordance with legal procedures and legal documents as a news agency."

5. Findings on Internet Censorship During the Cambodian General Elections

Websites selected for internet censorship monitoring

During the election period from 1 July 2023 to 15 August 2023, we monitored 53 websites in five categories: News (21 = 39.6%), Social Media (6 = 11.3%), Social Network (8 = 15.1%), Government, Election, or Politician (4 = 7.5%), and Human Rights Issues (14 = 26.4%).


Website Category
Gov/ Election/Politcian
7.5%
Human Rights Issues
26.4%
Social Network
15.1%
News
39.6%
social media
11.3%

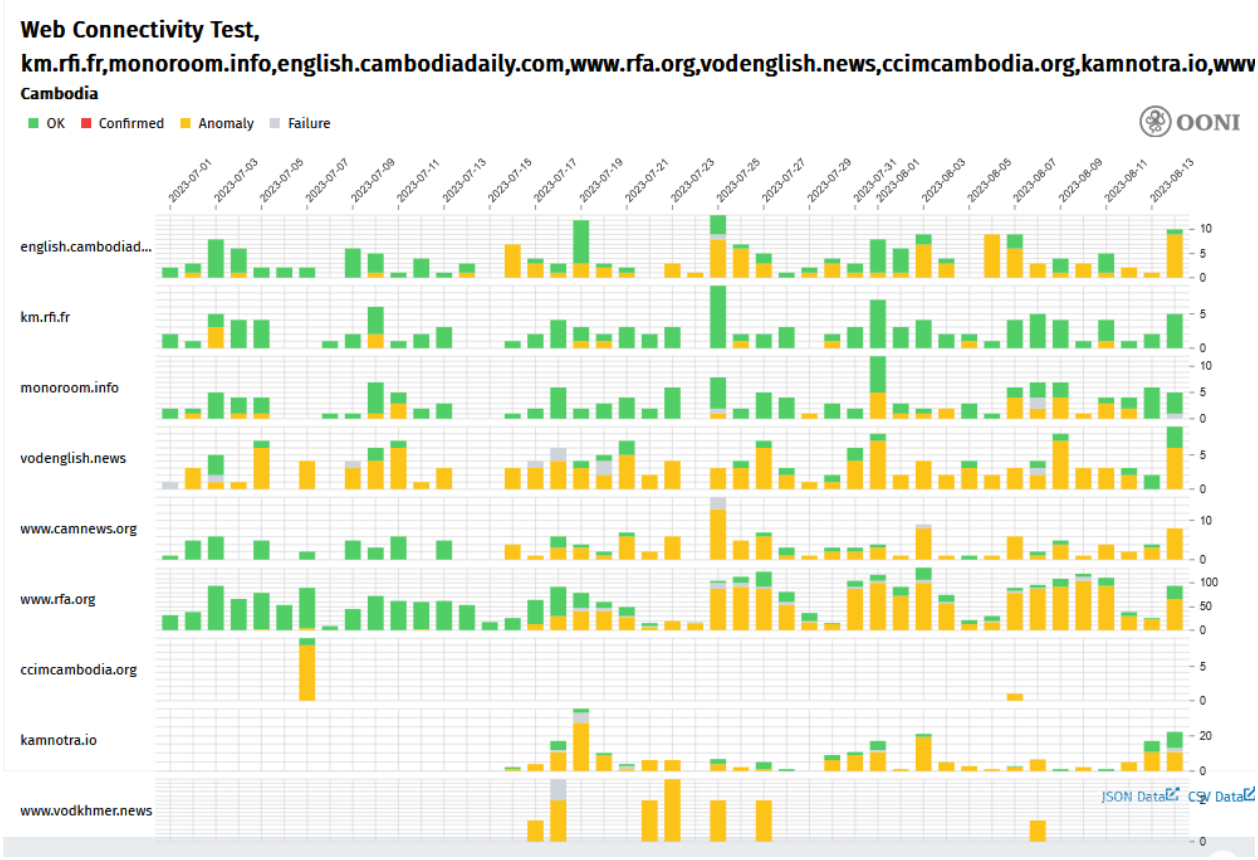
Measurements

The table below shows OONI measurements and testing results by website category.

Category	OONI Probe Measurements	Number of blocked and likely blocked measurements	Percentage of blocked and likely blocked measurements
News	2439	392	16%
Social Media	90	0	0%
Social Network	116	2	2%
Human Rights Issues	1130	8	1%
Government, Election, and Politician	218	0	0%

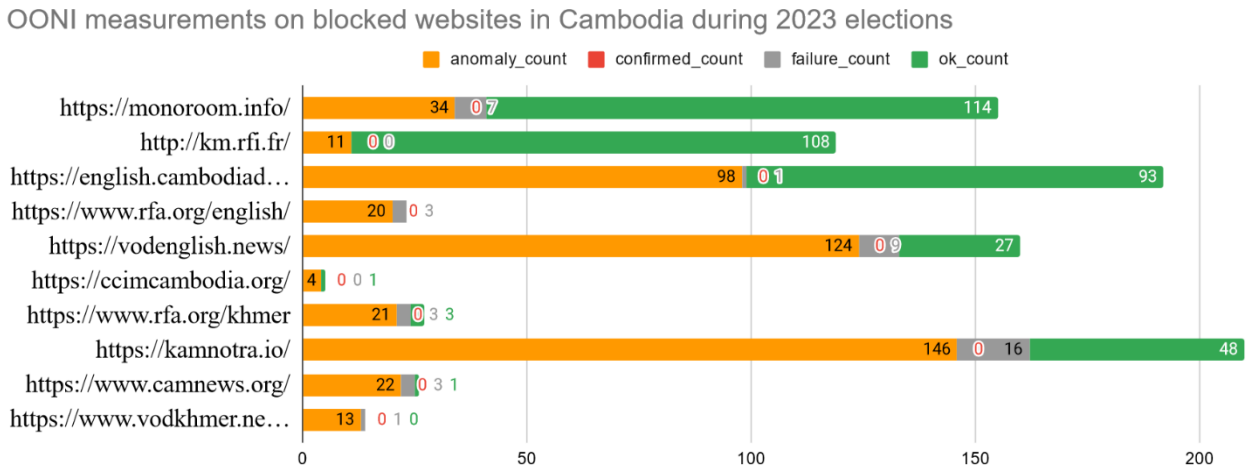
OONI traffic

The chart shows the traffic results after running the OONI Probe for the 10 blocked websites.



OONI measurements

These are the measurement data obtained using the OONI tools. No blocking is represented by “ok_count”, likely to be blocked is represented by “anomaly_count”, confirmed blockings are represented by “confirmed_count”, and failures by “failure_counts”. These likely blocked (anomaly_count) measurements were considered blocked websites. For further information on the blocking done by the ISP, please access the links found in the table under the “Details on Blocked Websites” section below.



Blocked websites

In the period of the election from 1 July 2023 to 15 August 2023, we monitored 53 websites from five categories: News (21 = 39.6%), social media (6 = 11.3%), Social Network (8 = 15.1%), Government, Election, or Politician (4 = 7.5%) and Human Rights Issues (14 = 26.4%).

Nine websites from the News categories and one website from the Human Rights category were blocked, particularly websites belonging to independent media outlets. The ISPs used the methods of either TCP (Transmission Control Protocol) or DNS blocking, which did not allow users to reach the websites.

These are the blocked independent news outlet websites and human rights websites:

1. Radio Free Asia in English (https://www.rfa.org/english/)
2. Radio Free Asia in Khmer (https://www.rfa.org/khmer)
3. Voice of Democracy in English (https://vodenglish.news/)
4. Voice of Democracy in Khmer (https://www.vodkhmer.news/)
5. The Kamnotra database run by the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)(https://kamnotra.io/)
6. Cambodia News (https://www.camnews.org/)
7. The Cambodia Daily (https://english.cambodiadaily.com/),
8. Monoroom News (https://monoroom.info/)

9. Radio France International (http://km.rfi.fr/)
10. Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) (https://ccimcambodia.org/)*

*Note: Testing of the CCIM website only had measurements on one day (7 July 2023) throughout the testing month, but it is most likely blocked as it showed anomalies like the other blockings during the testing.

Details of blocked websites

This table lists the 10 blocked websites, the names of the internet service providers, and links to the traffic data shown by the OONI Probe.

No.	Website	Internet service provider that implemented blocking	OONI Explorer chart links
1	https://www.rfa.org/english/	Angkor Data Communication, ANGKOR E & C, CAMGSM, COGETEL, EZECOM, KingCorp, S.I Group, Smart Axiata, Today Communication, Metfone, WiCAM.	Link
2	https://www.rfa.org/khmer	Angkor Data Communication, ANGKOR E & C, CAMGSM, COGETEL, EZECOM, KingCorp, S.I Group, Smart Axiata, Today Communication, Metfone, WiCAM.	Link
3	https://vodenglish.news/	ANGKOR E & C, CAMGSM, Iseek Communications, KingCorp, S.I Group, Smart Axiata, Today	Link

		Communication, Metfone, WiCAM.	
4	https://www.vodkhmer.news/	KingCorp, Smart Axiata, Today Communication, Metfone, WiCAM	Link
5	https://kamnotra.io/	ANGKOR E & C, CAMGSM, COGETEL, EZECOM, KingCorp, S.I Group, Smart Axiata, Today Communication, Metfone, WiCAM	Link
6	https://www.camnews.org/	ANGKOR E & C, COGETEL, EZECOM, KingCorp, S.I Group, Smart Axiata, Today Communication, Metfone, WiCAM	Link
7	https://english.cambodiadaily.com/	ANGKOR E & C, CAMGSM, S.I Group, Smart Axiata, Metfone	Link
8	https://monoroom.info/	CAMGSM Company Ltd, EZECOM Limited, S.I Group	Link
9	http://km.rfi.fr/	VIETTEL (CAMBODIA) PTE., LTD, WiCAM Corporation Ltd., ANGKOR E & C (CAMBODIA) Co.,Ltd., S.I Group	Link
10	https://ccimcambodia.org/	WiCAM Corporation Ltd.	Link

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

During the election period, we found that access to certain websites was blocked, including news and media websites. This raises significant concerns about press freedom, internet freedom, and censorship in Cambodia.

Based on the analysis and findings of the report, we reiterate the recommendations made by the OHCHR. It is recommended that the State (Cambodia) review and revise its current and pending legislation, including the Sub-Decree on National Internet Gateway and the amendments to the Press Law, the leaked draft cyber security law, and the draft laws on cybercrimes. We also recommend passing the draft access to information law to avoid the use of vague terminology and overly broad restrictions. The UN Human Rights Committee further recommends that the state ensure that in the formulation and enforcement of its legislation, including Ministerial Sub-Decrees, any restrictions on the exercise of freedom of expression, and association comply with the strict requirements of articles 19 (3) and 22 of the Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Convention on Human Rights.

The government should review and consider uplifting blocked websites that exercise the rights and freedom of expression and internet freedoms.

To contribute to the project

Monitoring online censorship is crucial, especially during significant political events such as elections. Here is how you can contribute to further improve OONI's measurements and results:

Testing: You can test on , both on Mobile (iOS and Android) and Desktop, including on the CLI on Linux platforms. There is also the newly introduced , where you can test on your browser. You can test either randomly selected domains from the or domains from custom test lists specific to your needs using .

Contribute to the test lists: You can contribute to the test lists on GitHub or on OONI.

Translation: Translate the OONI Probe to your local language here.

Join the community: Participate in community discussions on OONI's Slack channel.

About iMAP

The Internet Monitoring Action Project (iMAP) aims to establish regional and in-country networks that monitor network interference and restrictions to the freedom of expression online in 10 countries: Myanmar, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Timor-Leste. Sinar Project is currently working with national digital rights partners in these 10 countries. The project is done via Open Observatory Network Interference (OONI) detection and reporting systems, and it involves the maintenance of test lists as well as the collection and analysis of measurements. More information is available at . Any enquiries and suggestions about this report can be directed to .

About Advocacy Policy Institute

The Advocacy and Policy Institute (API) is a Cambodian non-governmental organization active in advocacy, policy influencing, good governance, and civic engagement. Capacity building and dialogue facilitation are at the heart of our efforts towards democratic and sustainable development. More information is available at https://apiinstitute.org/.

About CamboJA Journalist Alliance Association

CamboJA is Cambodia's only independent network of professional journalists. It was founded by a number of journalists, including former reporters from the Cambodia Daily and Phnom Penh Post, both of which were subjected to government repression in the run-up to the 2018 general elections.

Due to growing restrictions on media freedom and freedom of expression, 20 professional journalists from different media outlets held a meeting on the media situation in Cambodia in February 2019, during which CamboJA was initiated. Eventually, 15 of them agreed to form the governing body of CamboJA and became board members, aiming to establish a sustainable independent body that can carry out the mission to promote access to information and press freedom, strengthen the professionalism of journalists, and support their livelihoods.

About Cambodia Center for Independent Media

The Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) was established in the first quarter of 2007 and duly registered with the Ministry of Interior on 15 June 2007 as a non-governmental organization (NGO). CCIM was organized to work towards the promotion of independent media, press freedom, freedom of expression, access to information, and internet freedom. The mission of CCIM envisions a Cambodian society where every citizen is provided with comprehensive and up-to-date information and empowered to promote democracy, governance, and respect for human rights. CCIM has strengthened capacity building for aspiring journalists, citizen journalists, and youth related to basic journalism and digital rights, including the provision of legal support for professional and unprofessional journalists.

About Sinar Project

Sinar Project is a civic tech initiative that uses open technology, open data, and policy analysis to systematically make important information public and more accessible to the Malaysian people. It aims to improve governance and encourage greater citizen involvement in the public affairs of the nation by making the Parliament and the Malaysian Government more open, transparent, and accountable. More information is available at https://sinarproject.org.