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## **Pathways to Progress: Community Support and Youth Political Efficacy in Cambodia's Democratic Development**

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### **Abstract**

In the context of national elections, this study investigates the ways in which community support affects the political efficacy, motivation, and involvement of Cambodian youth. By adopting a developmental lens and presenting community support as a type of developmental capital that fosters agency and resilience, the research moves beyond deficit-based viewpoints that depict adolescents as indifferent or disengaged. The study shows that Cambodian youth are moving from post-conflict disengagement to active democratic participation by utilizing theory, history, and regional perspectives. While political socialization theory stresses the role of civic initiatives, NGOs, and schools in transferring democratic skills, social capital theory emphasizes how community networks promote trust and efficacy. Youth are using creativity, inclusiveness, and digital activism to increase participation despite persistent obstacles like political risk, generational gaps, and limitations on free speech. According to the findings, Cambodian young are increasingly playing a crucial role in determining the course of democratic development with the help of community institutions.

**Keywords:** Young people in Cambodia, social support, political effectiveness, democratic engagement, developmental capital

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Following the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements, Cambodia restored multi-party democracy in the early 1990s, which was hailed as a watershed in the nation's political history (United Nations, 1991). Decades of tyranny and civil war came to an end with it, creating the opportunity for democratic consolidation overseen by international organizations like the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) (Travouillon, 2015). Formal democratic procedures exist in a conflicting environment created by political reality, but they are limited by illiberal tendencies. It is within this contested democratic space that Cambodian youth have emerged as an increasingly important demographic. Cambodia has the youngest population in all Southeast Asia, with over sixty-five percent of its population being under

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the age of thirty (National Institute of Statistics, 2020). This demographic trend has important consequences for the country's politics and governance.

As demographers like Nordås and Davenport (2013) suggested, the so-called youth bulge will alter the political frame through the introduction of novel standards, expectations and behaviors. Young people are not simply passive consumers of the policies that the State implements; instead, they are savvy and tactical voters. As such, they have the potential to shape the outcome of an election, and political engagement will determine whether there is forward movement, backward movement, or stagnation with regards to the implementation of democracy.

The role of young people in democratic transitions has traditionally been associated with political effectiveness. In the case of Cambodia, the fact that democracy is associated with the political participation of young people means that there is an implicit expectation of the opening of policies. If young people are politically engaged, democracy is in a better place. Political efficacy, in this case, is the documented feeling that an individual is politically empowered. This feeling is associated with low internal efficacy and high external efficacy (Campbell & Miller, 1954). Bandura (1997) links this sense of empowerment to the perception of self-agency. In Cambodia, young people need to feel politically empowered to engage in voting and civic engagement in the present as well as in the future. Comparative studies provide evidence that when young people feel efficacious, they are more likely to engage in political activities, join civic organizations, and even sustain democratic reform movements (Croke et al., 2016; Myoung & Liou, 2022). Within this context, Cambodian youth are often described as a transformative demographic. According to Len and Sokphea (2021) and Soeung (2016), their sheer size and increasing exposure to global ideas, education, and technology make them vital players with the power to reorient Cambodia's democratic growth. Nonetheless, some commentators still note several impediments to the possible political activity of Cambodian youth (Huot, 2026b). While reforms on the national level are necessary, local communities, peer groups, schools, local NGOs, and places of worship are equally important to the political agency of young people (Huot, 2025b). These avenues can either contain or unleash their agency, thus prompting the need to understand community support to determine if youth political efficacy in Cambodia is stagnant, suppressed, or developing.

The growth of literature on youth political participation in Cambodia in recent years has attracted numerous deficit perspectives. As Transparency International Cambodia (2022) reports, young Cambodians often lack basic civic literacy and feel apathetic. In a similar vein, Len and Sokphea (2021) claim that systemic and institutional barriers such as lack of adequate civic education, repressive government rhetoric, and limited opportunities for political action continue to thwart the empowerment of youth. Cambodians' youth, particularly of the youth are often framed as politically passive, lacking resources, and vulnerable to manipulation by elites (Hinton, 2018). These perspectives focus on real problems, but by concentrating on the problems rather than the potential of young Cambodians, they tend to reinforce a narrative of powerlessness.

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A developmental perspective is focused on resilience, empowerment and growth as a counterbalance to the tendency to concentrate on variations in the degree or the types of challenges. From a developmental perspective, some of the most prominent scholars in the field, Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Damon (2008), argue that the youth agency phenomenon needs to be understood as a function of social, institutional and cultural arrangements over time. From this perspective, Cambodian adolescents ought to be viewed as individuals on developmental trajectories of transformational potential rather than in some form of permanent stasis. Evaluative frameworks of this type underscore the paradox of focusing on Cambodian youth and ignoring the considerable and often insufficient distance to be traversed that will lead to enhanced political participation and democracy, as well as the prevailing constraints (Huot & Chheang, 2026b). Focused on rapid and significant social change, this perspective is particularly useful in identifying the different forms of agency that might be overlooked in a deficit perspective, including political learning that was grassroots, digital mobilization and civic organizing, unstructured (Huot, 2026a).

The focus on community support as developmental capital is central to this approach. Developmental capital refers to the resources, relational, and network structures, which support young people to transition from passive observers to active participants in politics (Bourdieu, 1986). Schools, NGOs, places of worship, peer mentors, and youth groups are developmental sites for the cultivation of political competencies and self-efficacy. Youniss et al. (2002) note that the political participation of young people shifts from merely symbolic or occasional acts to regular, substantive acts when they become embedded in community support structures. Despite severe constraints, Cambodian youth are networked in solidarity, learning the rudiments of citizenship, and experimenting with new forms of politics. According to Ung (2014), for example, even in oppressive contexts, young people can articulate and advocate for political issues on the internet, which is becoming an important channel for civic engagement and self-organization. This review adopts a developmental approach to challenge the premise that in certain contexts, participation is intrinsically curtailed. Instead, it focuses on the obstacles and how, in this case, they could result in innovation and resilience.

The limitation of civic space, such as the imposition of certain laws governing street protests, has also motivated Cambodian youth to take up online activism, peer education, and informal community networks that foster political efficacy (Huot, 2026b). The framing of such restrictions as opportunity is in line with development theories that view adversity as space for growth and adaptation rather than simply a barrier (Damon, 2008). These flexible activities signal a new understanding of civic engagement in Cambodia, demonstrating that within constraining conditions, young people can cultivate their potential to contribute to democracy in meaningful ways.

Over the past five years, political engagement studies focusing on Cambodian youth have developed considerably. Öjendal and Sedara (2011) noted that although there has been a very gradual increase in the numbers of youth voting in national elections, for the first time,

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it appeared that Cambodian youth were developing the confidence to vote. Still, many young citizens remain doubtful concerning the responsiveness potential of political structures. Many still believe elections to be rigged, or the outcomes pre-determined (Strangio, 2020). In the same way, Ung (2014) states, even though new civic spaces have emerged, the potential of these spaces has been curtailed by state control and repression. Recently published studies have confirmed this duality. The 2019 Asia Foundation report noted that Cambodian youth have a strong interest in the resolution of community challenges, and yet they continue to be largely uninterested in formal political structures. The World Bank (2022) noted a growing awareness among young Cambodians of the merit of civic participation; however, this awareness was not supported by sufficient channels for such participation to be exercised.

Pickering (2025) mentions that youth civic organizations are becoming more visible but often lack resources and institutional recognition. Overall, these findings summarize a significant challenge: while most recent scholarship has broadened the scope of interest in youth engagement, literature continues to emphasize, almost exclusively, the more relevant and less contestable structural constraints like authoritarian consolidation, curtailed civic freedoms, and resource gaps. In doing so, it overlooks the strides made by Cambodian youth in galvanizing political efficacy through community mobilization. The need for approaches that focus on adaptable and new forms of democratic agency is further underlined by this disparity. This developmental assessment attempts to address this disparity through three interconnected objectives: (1) to describe the literature on Cambodian youth political participation as a positive political phenomenon in the context of political progress, (2) to articulate community, specifically educational, NGO, peer, and cultural community, support, as a pivotal factor in the enhancement of young political efficacy, and (3) to construe fear, apathy, and authoritarian control less as obstacles and more as opportunities for active democratic engagement and perseverance.

The unique character of this review emerges from its positive framing of issues, offering empirical political sociology approaches as opposed to using a political sociology-of-dissolution framework. The review, therefore, advances numerous primary issues by describing the moves from limitations to positive framing, focusing on empowerment. It also contributes to the enhancement of Cambodian political studies by addressing, for the first time, a major gap in the literature on youth regarding political indifference, political repression, civic dis-engagement, and lack of civic involvement, focusing instead on the literature's more positive aspects of political responsiveness, civic empowerment, and civic engagement.

### **II. SUPPORT FROM THE COMMUNITY AS A FORM OF DEVELOPMENTAL CAPITAL**

To understand fully the trajectory of the Cambodian youth and their political participation, one cannot ignore the role of community support as developmental capital. It is the supportive community network, resources, and social structures that empower youth in this case, Cambodian youth, to transform from passive political bystanders to active and constructive participants in the political democracy of the country. Supportive community

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networks are especially crucial in the case of countries like Cambodia that have closed political systems marked by electoral authoritarianism (Morgenbesser, 2019; Strangio, 2020) and in which community networks and structures have been politically disempowering and restrictive to the youth. Such networks and community structures furnish youth with invaluable alternative spaces to learn the basics of political participation, develop their political skills, and the necessary capacity to engage in active political participation (Huot, 2025b).

While there is some level of structural oppression in relation to where and how young people engage in Cambodia, it is important to consider the potential of the community to leverage developmental assets. Young people, in Cambodia, are not merely passive victims of authoritarianism, they are actively demonstrating community resilience and creativity. In Cambodia, community networks and institutions, including schools, operate to sustain peer support and developmental engagement, which allows young people to overcome barriers and forge new pathways to engagement (Huot, 2025a). Cambodia's young people can sustain and build new socially and politically relevant engagement. Young people and community institutions are creating social and politically important engagement. In Cambodia, educational institutions provide the most sustainable community development asset for young people (Huot, 2025b). Beginning in the early 2000s, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with development partners, including UNESCO, integrated civic education into the secondary school curriculum. Despite the unequal distribution of these programs, the significance of these programs over time is great (Huot & Chheang, 2026a; Strangio, 2020). Students are taught the basic concepts, rights, and responsibilities of democracy through these civic education programs.

The classes certainly seem limited in scope with authoritarian sensitivities involved, but these classes provide a basis for political consciousness that earlier generations lacked, according to (Transparency International Cambodia, 2022). Civic education appears to show promise in creating positive attitudinal changes among the youth. The Asia Foundation (2023) noted that at schools with civic education, students appear to be interested in discussing politics and issues of governance. Considering Cambodia's political history and lack of formal education that openly discussed politics, this cultural transformation is remarkable (Huot, 2025b). The small changes show schools are creating space, not just for knowledge, but for dialogue and the confidence that underpin political efficacy.

This function is enhanced even further at the tertiary level. Political awareness has risen greatly in the younger generations at the universities in and around Phnom Penh. Students can participate in advocacy initiatives, leadership training, and address social issues through student-run advocacy, leadership, and social issue forums, debate societies, and informal clubs. Despite the state control over these organizations, Huot (2025b) notes that young people have been able to practice democratic principles, such as leadership, consensus, and dialogue through student organizations. Students can strengthen a grassroots culture of civic engagement within their communities.

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An increase in youth-leading debates and class discussions also suggests a growing trend in critical thinking. For instance, Huot (2025a) indicated that several Cambodian universities organized intercollegiate debates on sustainable development and governance in 2021, which attracted significant audiences and were streamed online. These activities also enhanced young people's communication skills and, more importantly, legitimized civic and political discourse, thereby improving perceptions of advocacy. Therefore, it can be said that Cambodian educational institutions are transforming from merely being knowledge delivery systems to becoming active facilitators of democracy.

NGOs have been crucial in addressing the gaps in the government's efforts in civic engagement and education in the politically restricted environment of Cambodia. Since the proliferation of NGOs in the 1990s, they have been contributing to the development of democracy at the local and national levels (Guo, 2017; Hughes, 2003). Given the advocacy of NGOs for long-term sustainable social change, in the last two decades, they have been focusing on youth in their leadership training, civic education, and participation programs. One positive development in this regard has been the establishment of structured training programs on civic leadership, advocacy, and human rights. Thanks to the efforts of COMFREL, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, and the Youth Council of Cambodia, many young civic leaders have been trained to be election monitors, community organizers, and civic educators. Öjendal and Sedara (2011) argue that these trained youth consider themselves defenders of democracy, and the training and the roles assigned to them have legitimized their position. NGOs have also been instrumental in creating safe spaces for intergenerational dialogue.

In rural areas, where the state has not yet provided sufficient civic education, the role of NGOs becomes even more crucial. In these scenarios, NGOs typically function as the sole providers of civic education, training rural youths in participatory activities such as lobbying and community organizing. Huot (2025b) argues that these grassroots efforts have enabled rural youth to actively participate in local governance, demonstrating that civic development is not solely the domain of the urban elite, but is increasingly inclusive of all regions of Cambodia. This balanced development of civic engagement is also evident in rural Cambodia. While schools and NGOs provide primary structured support, peer mentorship and informal youth networks are equally critical. Cambodian youth often look to one another for support, motivation, and leadership. Political engagement through online platforms, volunteer groups, student organizations, peer groups, and informal networks is shielded from the observation of state authorities and is particularly relevant for political and civic activities. Bandura's (1997) social learning theory places an emphasis on the usefulness of learning through observation, and the social environments of Cambodian youth exemplify this phenomenon.

Ly (2023) and (Ung, 2014) explain that peer motivation enhances the chances that youths will engage in advocacy campaigns, participate in civic activities, and vote. Thus, peer influence encourages participation while also fostering the social norms around civic engagement. Sites like Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram have become powerful tools for peer

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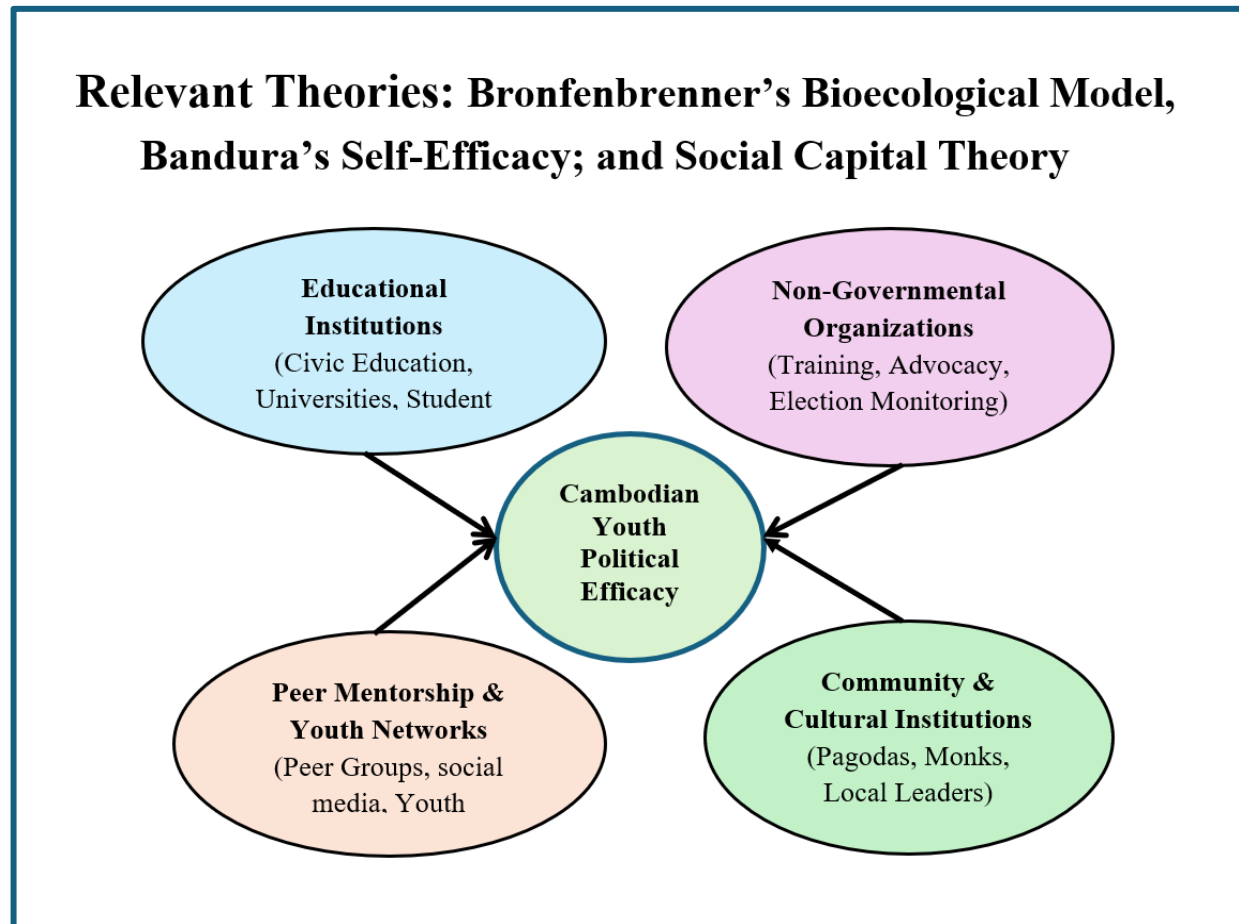
mobilization. Even in the face of potential repercussions and state surveillance, Cambodian youths have used these platforms for organizing civic events, building forums, and sharing political information. Strangio (2020) argues that digital tools have provided previously unconsidered avenues of civic engagement for young people in rural areas, while also providing unfiltered access to civic engagement for rural youth. Furthermore, it helps to build a supportive digital community for young people, reassuring them that they are not fighting their battles alone.

Positive trends can be noted regarding online campaigns led by youth, i.e. movements for the protection of the environment and campaigns for the awareness of anti-corruption. These campaigns, although sometimes limited in scope, have shown how digital means have empowered Cambodian youth to voice and lobby as a collective (Huot, 2025a). They demonstrate a peer solidarity phenomenon which strengthens the capacity to adapt and respond to informal constraints. Last, community and cultural organizations offer the Cambodian youth moral authority and local legitimacy for their civic engagement making them important developmental capital. Influencing the civic engagement of youth in Cambodia is Buddhism, which is highly engrained in the cultural fabric of the country. Hinton (2018) noted that monks in Buddhism gently encourage civic engagement which complements democratic values through teachings of compassion, equity, and social responsibility. To bridge the gap between spiritual and civic responsibility, some monks have recently taken and are continuing to take, a proactive approach of mentoring youth, facilitating ethics workshops, and encouraging civic volunteering. Also, local community leaders, village heads, elders, and other distinguished members of the community are important advocates of the aspirations of youth.

Öjendal and Sedara (2011) argue that local authorities' support of young projects legitimizes them and builds community backing. Because of their worth, elder support to youth voter education, environmental clean-up, and literacy campaigns, which have spread in rural areas, is common. This phenomenon demonstrates a broader pattern of cultural assimilation: Cambodia is rapidly embedding democracy in local customs and values, no longer seen as a distant and foreign imposition. Mentored youth from these cultural structures tend to view civic activism as a community responsibility, not a contest to power. This perspective augments the positive elements of civic activism, reduces the negative elements of political activism, and sustains the level of civic activism of the youth. Together, cultural structures, educational institutions, NGOs, and peer networks create a developmental web capital enabling youth political activism in Cambodia (Huot, 2025b). These structures foster civic and political participation, even when the structures of society face the greatest limitations.

More importantly, they prove that Cambodian youth are not merely victims of authoritarianism, demonstrating instead that they are navigating their environment, taking chances to participate and building a form of activism (Huot, 2025b). Together with their community, Cambodian youth are building a strong foundation with an activist focus on

community development, self-determination, and democracy. These positive trends suggest that despite the challenges, the young people in the country are emerging as a politically aware, active, and capable citizenry that is likely to be critical to the country's developing democracy, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.



*Figure 1. This visualized diagram is framed by theories; Bandura's self-efficacy, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, and Social Capital Theory, is a conceptual spot that illustrates how various community support systems, function as developmental capital feeding into Cambodian Youth Political Efficacy.*

### III. PROGRESSIVE TRENDS: PROOF OF ENHANCED ENGAGEMENT, EFFICACY, AND MOTIVATION

There has been a stark change in the last ten years within the political realm of the Cambodian youth. Unlike in the past when Cambodian youth showed a high degree of political disengagement and structural marginalization, the new Cambodian youth politically participate and show high levels of motivation and political efficacy (Huot, 2025a). However,

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this new political enthusiasm must be placed in a more dynamic context and more highly developed perspective in which the political attitudes of the Cambodian youth are viewed as active and responsive to authoritarian constraints. Rather, the new Cambodian youth is characterized in the context of a social system which views Cambodian youth as dynamic actors who are negotiating and redefining the boundaries of authoritarian political systems (Huot, 2025b). In this context of new positive change, in motivation, in the spheres of political efficacy and participation, this positive change in politically active Cambodian youth is examined relative to the numerous previous politically apathetic Cambodian youth.

Decades of civil war and the resulting intergenerational trauma, the authoritarian rule controlling as well as Cambodian culture, which discourages young people from questioning their elders or those in power, are some of the historical and structural factors shaping the perception of power in the political sphere (Guo, 2017; Hughes, 2003). Earlier studies suggest that there were significant youth disengagement and apathy as they felt politics did not concern their daily struggles and means of survival (Huot, 2025b; Morgenbesser, 2019). The ever-present memories of violence that stifled political discussions in families further compounded an environment of caution and disengagement (Hinton, 2018). Recent developments, however, indicate that there is a shift occurring.

Today, Cambodian youth are more politically engaged and curious, civically questioning and demanding accountability. Soeng and Kao (2024) state that diaspora, education, and the rise of digital technology and global interconnectedness have facilitated young Cambodians' critical thinking about political representation and governance. This change is observable in rural and urban areas alike. In Phnom Penh, university students have become more politically active, engaged in volunteerism, and participated in social discussions and forums about activism. There is a growing willingness among young individuals in rural areas who engage in NGOs and community associations to confront local governance structures, particularly in relation to environmental issues, access to education, and the management of land (Huot & Chheang, 2026c).

Cambodian youth's concern with state accountability, transparency, and corruption is an example of an emerging focus of discontent that is not driven by economic insecurity (Asia Foundation, 2019). Unlike previous generations, young Cambodians are more likely than older generations to express dissatisfaction with government and voice concerns in public forums (World Bank, 2022). This indicates a shift from apathy and privately held views to active participation in public forums. This is a positive sign of change with an emerging political culture. Motivated individuals do not always mean to participate. Political efficacy, the belief that one's actions can impact political outcomes, can explain this gap (Campbell & Miller, 1954). In the case of Cambodia, the lack of perceived responsiveness of the political system makes promoting a sense of efficacy more challenging (Strangio, 2020). Despite this, evidence suggests that Cambodian youth are developing both internal and external efficacy through everyday activities, small, achievable goals, and collaborative activities. Youth's

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increasing self-confidence in speaking, mobilizing, and acting in public is the manifestation of internal efficacy.

Training youth councils and student organizations in leadership and facilitation skills is illustrated by Pickering (2025). Young people's organizing, public speaking and lobbying skills are developed in such contexts. More significantly, the process builds the confidence of young people in being active change agents, even if the outcomes are modest. Cambodia's perception of the level of responsiveness of systems of governance has started changing due to local advocacy successes. There is, in fact, a history of low external efficacy in Cambodia, defined as the belief systems that social structures are responsive to the people. Öjendal and Sedara (2011) provide examples of youth advocacy that, through local governance, made a positive change in community identified needs such as the improvement of waste collection, education, and the protection of community land. Although these advocacy initiatives may appear insignificant, they convey an important message that young people's participation can influence change, thereby enhance their self-worth and make them feel they have a voice.

Digital activism has also improved youth efficacy (Huot, 2026a). As Ly (2023) notes, social media has enabled young Cambodians to mobilize around public issues, articulate their views, and fight corruption. Even when under surveillance, youth creatively use humor, satire, and code to criticize power. These acts demonstrate that young people can be resilient and that there are other avenues to demonstrate their frustrations and make discourse outside of direct confrontation, even in highly perilous situations.

There are improved levels of motivation and efficacy, which has resulted in greater youth participation in multiple areas. Cambodian youth are participating in digital activism, volunteerism, grassroots activism, and even politics to levels that are unprecedented when compared to previous decades. This activism has resulted in an interplay of continuity and change, whereby young people are diversifying their participation in civic digital spaces and returning to more traditional forms of activism like voting. There has also been an observable increase in grassroots activism, particularly in volunteerism and campaigning at the community level. Guo (2017) and Hughes (2003) offer numerous examples of youth involvement in community-based voter education, awareness-raising, and development projects, many of which are sponsored by international NGOs.

Along with providing communities valuable benefits, these initiatives also provide young participants with opportunities for experiential education. Huot (2025b) states that grassroots initiatives function as entry points to civic engagement, enabling youth to practice participation at low-risk settings before moving on to more explicitly political activities.

The case of Youth Electoral participation also signals some progress. Even though elections in Cambodia are still being questioned in terms of fairness, there has been a very small increase in youth electoral participation. Reported by Öjendal and Sedara (2011), there is a willingness from some younger participants to vote in elections, though some participants believe voted elections lack impact. Despite the less improved system, many participants vote as an expression of their voice. During the election period, Pickering (2025) notes the

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spontaneous formation of many youths' civic groups and their active participation in concurrent campaigns to educate the electorate on their rights, accountability, and transparency, among other things. These campaigns, even without an improvement in democracy, still foster a more democratic environment in the context of elections. What used to be the most active sector for youth participation is now the Internet. Strangio (2020) notes that a significant number of Cambodian youths are participating in politics via Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram. Online activities to promote participation that are not politics are still more common than traditional politics. Ly (2023) and Ung (2014) observe that civic activities conducted on the Internet, where young people can communicate, assess, and recommend change without the barriers of a real world, are often conducted in parallel civic spaces.

Digital activism fosters greater inclusivity through participation opportunities for young people in rural areas without direct access to formal civic institutions. These individuals can still engage in national dialogues through mobile phones and internet access, as outlined in **Table 1**.

*Table 1. Progressive Trends in Cambodian Youth Political Participation*

Dimensions	Important Developments	Positive Developmental Progress
Enhanced Drive	Change from indifference to interest; insist on representation and responsibility.	Demands for accountability and civic inquiry are motivating young people increasingly.
Increasing Political Effectiveness	Gaining influence and a sense of voice through little triumphs.	Youth self-esteem is bolstered by observable outcomes and flexible tactics.
Increased Involvement	Increased participation in elections, volunteer work, grassroots initiatives, and online activism.	Expanded and varied participation strengthened the democratic culture.

#### IV. DIFFICULTIES AS POSSIBILITIES: WEAKNESSES REFAMED AS OPPORUNITIES FOR GROWTH

The obstacles that still affect and sometimes limit the agency of Cambodian youth political engagement are multifold. Authoritarian consolidation, restricted civic liberties, fear of retaliation, and the resource and education access divide, are some of the most powerful obstacles. These political and social structural challenges are the frustrations and fears of Morgenbesser (2019) and Strangio (2020), under the wing of the Cambodian political system, and articulating the coexistence of authoritarianism and democracy. However, losing sights of the condition of the youth politically and socially, these obstacles are viewed through a purely developmental perspective, and that these are stimuli for the Cambodian youth political engagement system. Along with the Bioecological Model, the system of engagement is multilayered, and the obstacles are political, social, and economic, positive and negative. Bandura (1997) asserted that self-efficacy is the function of control, and having control over a

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situation will produce the agency that is lacking. From the perspective of Cambodia, barriers to engagement often foster innovative forms of active citizenship, transforming constraints into opportunities for growth.

The restrictions on political plurality and freedom of expression are some of the most significant concerns for young people in Cambodia. The ruling party controls over political competition and opposition goes dissuading activism of all forms (Freedom House, 2022; Morgenbesser, 2019). Avoiding active political engagement of the youth and discouraging political expression (rather than detaching youth from political activism) creates a demand for less direct political activism, or more symbolic forms of civic engagement. Ollier and Winter (2006) note the increased use of the arts and cultural expressions as a form of soft political commentary in Cambodia. Youth art groups, for instance, create murals and artwork that express ideas related to social and environmental justice and that speak for self-determined audiences without a direct political message. Digital activism is also expanding in Cambodia. Depicting 'Ducati' social networks, Ly (2023) shares how Cambodian youth express political discontent and critique the government through humor, satire, and coded messages, which is often done through memes. The digital behaviors of young people show resilience. It shows that they can find new ways to adapt their behaviors while still expressing their desire to engage with their peers.

On the one hand, the scope of traditional protest politics has been narrowed because of institutional encroachments. On the other hand, these changes have triggered the emergence of new civic spaces, characterized by young people's playful, imaginative, and socially responsive, civil disobedience, and democratic practice. Another major challenge is the disparate availability of resources, and the gap is widening between urban and rural adolescents. Rural adolescents are often most disadvantaged, while cities like Phnom Penh can enjoy the benefits of universities, NGOs, and access to the internet and the global community (World Bank, 2022). Rural youth, as noted by The Asia Foundation (2023), demonstrate a lack of civic engagement and civic awareness. This is often because they have fewer educational and training opportunities. Nonetheless, for community-based programming the purpose of alleviating these disparities is increasingly aimed at preventing long-term exclusion.

Rural areas have welcomed the expansion of operations of nonprofits such as COMFREL and the Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC) that have focused on hosting youth camps and civic education and leadership training workshops (Öjendal & Sedara, 2011). These initiatives foster relationships between participants from rural and urban areas and provide means for active rural youth engagement. Moreover, student associations from Phnom Penh are increasingly visiting the provinces for collaborative community service, illustrating the significance of urban-rural interaction. This reciprocity benefits both participants: urban youth acquire first-hand experience on the challenges and opportunities of governance and development beyond the capital and rural youth acquire new advocacy strategies and information. These programs and initiatives foster a unified youth civic movement that

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transcends geographical silos (Huot, 2025b; Len & Sokphea, 2021). Cambodia's youth also face the challenge of generational divides. The history of violence and the elements of the culture that emphasize hierarchy position youth as subservient to elders.

Hinton (2018) mentions that many seniors who have been through decades of oppression have been politically traumatized, making them see politics as a danger, and advising the young to stay away from it. Young people, however, embrace the openness, democracy, and rights of the political systems of the countries they got to through school and the internet (Morgenbesser, 2019). This misunderstanding is sometimes the reason for conflicts, where the younger ones see the seniors as overly passive and the seniors see the young as impolitely and politically naive. This tension is becoming more a source of change and dialogue rather than conflict. NGOs and religious groups have intergenerational dialogue initiatives that promote collaboration between seniors and young people to address community problems. Sedara and Öjendal (2014) refer to these as cross-generational activities, and they highlight poverty, the environment, and education. The involvement of seniors in community projects enhances the legitimacy and authority of young people in each community.

Hinton (2018) illustrates how pagoda committees and Buddhist monks, in their juxtaposition of active engagement and cultural preservation, encourage young people to be politically active with morally oriented politics grounded in justice and compassion. This encourages activism along with the preservation of cultural elements. Applying the process described illustrates the potential of intergenerational conflict to encourage new forms of civic engagement that support elements of democratic change while maintaining the value of the old.

Similarly, political case retaliation is the main issue the writer is concerned with the most. Young people tend to stay away from extreme involvement in actions as they run the risk of being surveilled, intimidated, or even arrested (Strangio, 2020). The presence of fear is powerful, and in this case, can lead to apathy and cause fear to disengage. Young people, along with supportive, adaptive institutions, have modified fear as an obstacle. More community and service-learning organizations, colleges, and adult learning centers are providing safe places to learn about and discuss civic issues. Nonpartisan topics, such as social entrepreneurship, community health, and environmental protection, are focused on empowering young people to practice their leadership and management skills. Norén-Nilsson (2024) states that initiatives of this sort instill empowerment that can be transported to more overtly political initiatives. There are positive sides to technology, such as digital and social media, even though there are some apprehensions. Because of certain resources, such as anonymous forums, closed chats, and digital end to end encryption, youth can participate in social movements and have exchanges without being visible (Ly, 2023). Schools and colleges strengthen resilience by embedding civic education and debate into controlled environments, as is seen in **Table 2** of the accompanying tables.

*Table 2. Obstacles as Chances for Political Involvement by Cambodian Youth*

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Challenge	Barrier	Adaptive Reaction	Outcome
Barriers in Structure	State surveillance, limited political plurality, and restrictions on free speech.	Using humor, art, cultural initiatives, digital activism, and community projects to engage in creative civic involvement.	Creation of new civic forums for political speech, inventiveness, and resilience.
Inequalities in Resources	Disparities in access to technology, civic education, and education between urban and rural areas.	Youth outreach, mobile civic education, inclusive community initiatives, and information sharing between urban and rural areas.	Greater young solidarity, broader inclusivity, and less marginalization.
Generational Conflicts	Disparities between contemporary young principles of openness and rights and seniors influenced by trauma or tradition.	Forums supported by NGOs, intergenerational discussions, Buddhists and local authorities supporting youth programs.	Civic skill development and sustainable engagement strategies in safe settings.
Fear and Political Risk	Fears of persecution, intimidation, or detention due to political involvement.	Secure digital networks, nonpartisan civic concerns, and safe spaces in NGOs and schools.	Sustainable forms of engagement, cultivation of civic skills in protective environments

### V. INTEGRATIVE SYNTHESIS: FUSING DATA FROM SYSTEMATIC STUDIES, THEORY, AND HISTORY

To understand the Cambodian youth political engagement, it is utterly important to build a thorough framework that combines theoretical perspectives, historical settings, and regional systematics. Each of these strands provides a thoughtful, albeit partial, explanation. Systematic analyses place Cambodia in a wider regional and global context, theories explain the community supportive characteristics of the adolescent efficacy, and the historical perspective explains the Cambodian youth particular ways of experiencing involvement (Huot, 2025a). These perspectives, taken together, offer a constructive explanation: community support, developmental in nature, fosters civic capacity and positions Cambodian youth as democratic agents of change, rather than compensatory; closing the gaps of the rudimentary state structures.

Several theoretical lenses that have been employed for a lengthy period to analyze young political behavior can be applied to Cambodia, but it also brings to the fore the importance of making such analyses within a semi-authoritarian and post-conflict context. Social capital theory, as Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) elucidate, appreciates the role of

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networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trust as mechanisms of civic participation. Scholars explain that with strong social networks, people tend to feel empowered and able to act collectively.

This methodology applies especially well to Cambodia, where, while democratic systems are ineffective or unresponsive, community-based networks remain intact. Research about Cambodian villages suggests that, among young people, peer groups, family networks, NGOs, and religious institutions are often the primary places where they learn to collaborate and collectively make and execute decisions (Öjendal & Sedara, 2011). Young people are provided with networks that serve both useful and symbolic functions, signaling to them that their voice is important. For example, young people in Cambodia who work in unison in youth and community development projects develop not only their technical competencies but also the trust and relationships that make their group effective. Where opposition politics are banned by the state, these networks are even better than practices of democracy. Political socialization theory offers rationalization, as democracy, civic education and political efficacy develop in stages. Classic studies, (Campbell & Miller, 1954; Niemi & Hepburn, 1995) describe the role of civic associations, families, and schools in the transmission of political norms. In Cambodia, from the lack of state institutions, community projects and NGOs fulfill this role, as civic education is either not provided or is heavily ideologized.

Youth participation practices through civic education workshops, election monitoring, and leadership training implemented by COMFREL, Transparency International Cambodia, and Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC) (Comfrel, 2022; Silaka et al., 2023). In addition to traditional forms of learning, these initiatives allow young people to practice skills such as lobbying, dialogue, and consensual decision-making. In self-efficacy theory, Bandura (1997) argues that such experiential learning optimally stimulates self-confidence and reinforces the belief in controllable outcomes. The role of NGOs as developmental organizations in this framework is to catalyze the democratic potential of young Cambodians through these initiatives.

Beyond these frameworks, developmental perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Damon, 2008) assert that the nature of juvenile agencies is constructive and changes over time because of supportive interactions. With sustained contact with supportive community structures, Cambodian youth civic actors are developing a proactive civic agency. The community and digital advocacy initiatives, as well as the peer group discussions, demonstrate the evolving civic agency of young people (Huot, 2025b). These incremental steps toward community and civic leadership are the building blocks of longer-term sustained democratic activism. This is why it is important to look at the cumulative effect of these initiatives.

The frameworks used should be grounded in Cambodia's own historical context and how it has shaped the politics of the young. Cambodia's multi-party democracy was officially restored after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991, and the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993 (Travouillon, 2015).

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Yet, Hughes (2003) and Strangio (2020) note that the processes of democratization were a result of the ruling party practices alongside the continuation of established patronage networks. For the war and tyranny survivor generation, politics were associated with danger and instability.

This trauma legacy caused widespread disengagement, particularly among seniors who dissuaded their children from getting involved in politics (Hinton, 2018). Therefore, caution and indifference dominated the early post-conflict period. From the 1990s to the early 2000s, Cambodian youth often avoided politics and prioritized survival and subsistence. Over the past two decades, however, younger generations have begun to reclaim their civic identity. National Institute of Statistics (2020) argues that due to the youth bulge in Cambodia, with over sixty-five percent of the population being under thirty, young people have become transformative actors in the country's political culture. There are also positive comparisons with other emerging democracies, which reinforce the developmental trajectory of Cambodian youth.

Indonesia's youth have been instrumental in civil society engagement even during the mobilization against Suharto's authoritarianism in 1998 (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2010). The role of NGOs and students in the People Power Revolution of the 1980s in the Philippines has been significant and continues to sustain transformative civic movements (Sidel, 1999). While the pace and authoritarianism of the Cambodian context is unique, the generational experience is comparable. Young people become the catalysts for democratic change even when there appears to be little movement in the political system. Systematic studies of youth activism in various Southeast Asian contexts provide more insights into Cambodia's situation. Southeast Asian youth have been described as innovators under constraint.

Although Bennett et al. (2011) argue that digital technologies have enabled young people to creatively bypass governmental restrictions and enhance their voices, Mietzner (2012) notes that NGOs often act as parallel civic institutions, empowering young people through lacking governmental provision. Youth groups have been instrumental in fostering accountability and transparency, even in authoritarian and fragile democratic contexts, as seen in Thailand, Myanmar, and the Philippines. While Cambodia has its own unique characteristics, it shares many of these similar processes.

Additionally, the country suffers from its own challenges, such as intergenerational trauma and vertical social structures. However, like their peers in the region, Cambodian youth are active and creative in using NGOs, community networks, and social media. Ly (2023) demonstrates that for social media, Cambodian youth critique and organize. The combination of theory, history and systematic evidence shows an integrative trajectory.

During the immediate post-conflict time in Cambodia, the gaps left by the weak state were filled by the advocacy and basic civic education of NGOs, religious institutions, and international organizations. These institutions offered safe spaces for discourse, which is what the state lacked. For these institutions, this was most likely compensatory community support (Huot, 2025b). For these organizations, youth were most likely passive beneficiaries of these

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services. However, in the last 20 years, this function has changed from passive to active. Today, community support has transformed from merely civic gap filling to developing civic capacity. Educational institutions, NGOs, youth associations, and cultural institutions are all positive contributors to community support by providing safe spaces for agency, leadership, and collaborative problem-solving. Youniss et al. (2002) argue that for youth to develop fully, they need safe spaces to exercise their agency. These have become increasingly available in Cambodia. This development has meant that for the first time, young people in Cambodia have had the political efficacy to engage in democracy as a long-term response to governmental failure. This is what is represented in **Table 3**.

**Table 3.** *Comprehensive Analysis of Political Involvement Among Cambodian Youth*

Dimensions	Key Focus	Cambodian Evidence	Contribution
Hypothesis	Self-Efficacy, Political Socialization, and Social Capital Theory	Trust and effectiveness are fostered by community networks (youth associations, NGOs, and pagodas); NGOs such as YCC and COMFREL offer leadership training.	Support from the community increases effectiveness, civic awareness, and democratic abilities.
Historical Development	From apathy following a conflict to a slow civic awakening	Disengagement in the 1990s brought on by trauma and authoritarianism; youth bulge and internet exposure in the 2000s–2020s foster civic identity.	Youth become more vocal and develop a sense of civic identity.
Methodical Perspectives	Southeast Asian youth regional evaluations.	Cambodia follows tendencies but is subject to more authoritarianism; Indonesia (post-Suharto student movements); and the Philippines (People Power, NGOs).	Cambodian teenagers respond differently to constraints despite sharing regional resilience.
The Integrative Argument	Transitioning from compensatory to developmental community support	NGOs first covered gaps in civic education; now, they foster civic capacity, leadership, and unity.	Young people are increasingly seen as democratic participants rather than passive beneficiaries.

## VI. CONCLUSION

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This survey illustrates that instead of remaining indifferent to the evolving politics of their nation, the youth of Cambodia are fighting for democracy. The findings show that the community backing, in the case of educational NGOs, peer networks, and community culture, acts as developmental support, equipping the youth with knowledge, confidence, and skills to transform the political landscape of Cambodia. This perspective encompasses the developmental positive shift in political efficacy and the rejuvenation of civic identity and participation in both the established and emerging digital participation, in contrast to the predominant framing of youth engagement as passive or repressed.

The most important appreciation is that Cambodian youth are seemingly beginning to break out of the margins of political engagement. Positive shifts illustrate a move from general indifference to increasing interest, drive, and participation. In ways that were much less obvious a generation ago, they are organizing discussions, running small scale internet activism, engaging in grassroots community initiatives, and holding the powerful to account. These may seem small in the context of a liberal democratic polity, but in a context where political engagement is considered dangerous and unapproachable, they are a big deal. In collaboration with members of their civil society, Cambodian youth are developing the capacity to move from the purely symbolic to the substantive in their demands for democratic engagement. Many of the issues that the youth face is of a structural, persistent, and real nature such as restricted freedom of movement, unequal access to youth services, intergenerational disengagement, and fears of victimization that permeate the community. These issues need to be understood as developmental constraints rather than obstacles. In a constructive sense, they delineate the margins within which community and institutional support are likely to be more flexible, responsive, and creative.

Limitation are positional cues for innovative expressions such as civic advocacy, while disparity is inclusive outreach, gaps promote forum for discussion, and fear gaps are safe spaces for learning and engagement. In this sense, Cambodian youth's limitations are growth areas that foster resilience and adaptability, instead of acting as impassable barriers.

The contribution this review makes is to break from the deficit-centered narratives that have dominated accounts of Cambodian youth and politics. Scholarship, to the extent that it exists, has focused on the knowledge, opportunity, or courage young people lack, rather than the myriad ways in which young people are acquiring the capacity to act and the agency to fight. Using a developmental framing, the review constructs positive accounts of Cambodian youth and politics based on Cambodian youth democracy fostering from within an extremely limiting democracy. The review notes several possible new research trajectories. Most importantly, the cumulative nature of efficacy and participation calls for longitudinal approaches that extend across multiple election cycles. In Southeast Asia, it is desirable and feasible to research Cambodian youth in comparison to their peers in Indonesia, the Philippines, or Myanmar to understand the features of a hierarchical post-conflict society, as well as the similarities and differences among Cambodian youth and their peers. Such

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research may enrich our understanding of young people as democratic actors in the absence of robust democratic structures.

All the reviews come to the same conclusion; Cambodian youth have the community support and the determination to continue making the progress they have been making. They are changing the civic engagement paradigm and are self creatively redefining and further enlarging the scope of civic activism within the constraints of the system. This path may be incomplete and full of challenges, but it is also full of potential and optimism. Cambodian youth are active participants and are not the passive inheritors of an authoritarian past. They are the builders of the future democracy.

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