Cambodia PM backtracks on threat to ban Facebook amid content row

A political fiasco has unfolded for Facebook after Prime Minister Hun Sen was accused of inciting violence on the platform.

Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen, centre, poses for selfies with supporters of his ruling Cambodian People’s Party at an election campaign rally in Phnom Penh in 2017 [File: Tang Chhin Sothy/AFP]

Would Cambodia’s strongman ruler Hun Sen follow through on a threat to block access to Facebook for his country’s millions of users?
That was the question many asked in the nation of 17 million people on Friday when the prime minister began his day threatening to ban the social media platform, but then walked back his warning in a late-night statement.

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“I only decided to close down my own Facebook,” Hun Sen said in a voice message on the Telegram messaging app on Friday night.

“I have no intention to shut down Facebook in Cambodia,” he said, closing out a day in which many Cambodians discovered that their ruler of almost 40 years had been accused by a Facebook oversight board of inciting violence against political opponents on his profile page.

What has become a political fiasco for Facebook in Cambodia began on Thursday when a board of experts adjudicating content for Meta Platforms Inc, which owns Facebook, called for a six-month suspension of Hun Sen’s Facebook and Instagram accounts over a livestreamed speech in which he allegedly threatened violence against political opponents.
A person uses a smartphone to look at the Facebook page of Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen [File: Samrang Pring/Reuters]

The board said Hun Sen had incited violence “at the highest level of severity”, and ordered that a video of the speech streamed in January, be removed immediately by Facebook.

“Given Hun Sen’s reach on social media, allowing this kind of expression on Facebook enables his threats to spread more broadly. It also results in Meta’s platforms contributing to these harms by amplifying the threats and resulting intimidation,” the board said.

“Given the severity of the violation, Hun Sen’s history of committing human rights violations and intimidating political opponents, and his strategic use of social media to amplify such threats, the Board calls
on Meta to immediately suspend Hun Sen’s Facebook Page and Instagram account for six months,” it added.

Within hours of the publication of the board’s ruling, Hun Sen announced that he had deleted his Facebook account – where he has amassed some 14 million followers – claiming he did so because of impersonators on the social media platform.

Hun Sen, a prolific poster on Facebook who has relied on the platform to spread his political messaging for years, did not mention the Meta board’s ruling that he had incited violence or that he was facing a six-month suspension.

A day before the board ruling was made public, Hun Sen said that he was moving over to the Telegram platform, which was “more effective”, and that he would also create a TikTok account to connect with younger people.

The Meta oversight board’s recommendation to suspend the prime minister’s accounts comes less than a month before the country’s next national election and, by Friday morning, Hun Sen warned of blocking Facebook altogether, “for a short period or forever”, according to news reports.
Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen views his smartphone during a celebration for his long-ruling Cambodian People’s Party in Phnom Penh, Cambodia [File: Heng Sinith/AP]
His apparent threat to cut access to Facebook prompted fears among the country’s millions of users, especially those who use the platform for online business.

“I urge the prime minister to reconsider and think about people’s businesses,” a Cambodian online business owner said, recounting how she had felt sick upon hearing the news of the leader’s dispute with Facebook.

“I’ve earned my living there for more than five years,” said the 29-year-old, who asked to remain anonymous as she feared repercussions for criticising the government.

In his statement on Friday night rolling back this threat to block Facebook, Hun Sen spoke directly on the necessity of E-commerce in Cambodia.

“We are not foolish to shut down Facebook, because a lot of people use it, including online sellers,” Hun Sen said in his message on Telegram.

Hun Sen again did not mention the oversight board’s ruling or suspension recommendation, saying only that he had his “own reasons” for cutting ties with Facebook, adding also that Meta did not need to suspend his account.
A supporter takes a selfie with Hun Sen in 2017. Hun Sen had amassed some 14 million followers on his Facebook page, which he has now deleted following claims by an oversight board that he incited violence against political opponents in a livestreamed video hosted on the platform [File: Samrang Pring/Reuters]

‘He wasn’t going to win this one’

Praising the Meta board’s ruling on Hun Sen, Daron Tan, a legal adviser for the International Commission of Jurists, said that Hun Sen’s reaction appeared to be a “clear retaliation” over his possible suspension.
But in his threat to ban Facebook, Cambodian users of the platform were being told to “pay the price” for Hun Sen’s abuse of the platform’s policies, Tan said.

Sophal Ear, a political economist and Cambodia expert at Arizona State University, also said Hun Sen chose to jump ship before the suspension.

Hun Sen “knew he wasn’t going to win this one”, Sophal Ear said.

“Instead he pretended it was his decision, that he’d moved on from Facebook and Instagram on his own — typical ‘nothing to see here, keep moving,’” Sophal Ear told Al Jazeera.

“But we all know the truth. There is accountability and rule of law, even on Facebook,” he said.

Amid Hun Sen’s public shunning of the platform, his political loyalists also called for a ban with supporters of the prime minister sharing on social media an image of the Facebook logo overlaid with a prohibited sign – a red circle with a diagonal red line inside.
Commuters drive past the Meta sign outside the headquarters of Facebook parent company Meta Platforms Inc in Mountain View, California, the US, in 2022 [File: Peter DaSilva/Reuters]

Cambodia’s Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications also on Friday told online gateway operators in the country to share Hun Sen’s new Telegram and TikTok accounts. The ministry, in a separate announcement on Friday evening, called for an end to public and private partnerships with Facebook, citing “political interference”.

Meta has yet to respond to a request for comment.

Hun Sen’s ruling party networks, which operate at every level of Cambodian society, have also started promoting his new social media accounts.
A Phnom Penh University student who declined to be named for fear of retaliation said their student association called a meeting on Friday and told students to “spread the word” about following Hun Sen’s new social media accounts.

Student association members were also told to monitor other students’ social media activity.

“If students weren’t following the accounts”, the student said, association members were told to “follow up and ask them why”.

“I just feel like it’s not acceptable for youth, at university or in the education system, to be told these things,” the student told Al Jazeera.

Cambodia’s national election

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said the prime minister had the right to switch communication platforms if he wanted to.

But banning access to Facebook for the Cambodian public “would also deprive them of their right to freedom of expression”, Chak Sopheap said.
Relatives of Cambodia’s jailed opposition members protest in front of the Phnom Penh Municipal Court in 2022, as it sentenced opposition politicians and supporters to jail terms over an alleged plot to topple Hun Sen [File: Tang Chhin Sothy/AFP]

Though Hun Sen is now without his main social media platform as the national election approaches, critics had already claimed that the prime minister’s ruling party was very unlikely to lose the vote after the only serious political challenger, the Candlelight Party, was disqualified in May over a registration technicality.

That disqualification echoed events in 2017 – ahead of the country’s last national election – when the popular opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party was banned, leading Hun Sen’s party to then win every seat in parliament.
Cambodia’s return to a one-party state – not last seen since the Communist 1980s – comes as Hun Sen has announced plans to hand power to his son, and his promise that their ruling party will dominate the country’s politics for another 100 years.