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FACEBOOK gets sued for rigging
the public perceptions for corrupt
politicians

Facebook “likes” are a powerful tool for authoritarian rulers, court petition says

Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen. (REUTERS/Adnan Abidi)

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A Cambodian opposition leader has filed a petition in a California court against Facebook, demanding the company disclose its transactions with his country’s authoritarian prime minister, whom he accuses of falsely inflating his popularity through purchased “likes” and spreading fake news.

The [petition](#), filed Feb. 8, brings the ongoing debate over [Facebook’s power to undermine democracies](#) into a legal setting. The petitioner, Sam Rainsy, says that Hun Sen, the prime minister, “has used the network to threaten violence

against political opponents and dissidents, disseminate false information, and manipulate his (and the regime's) supposed popularity, thus seeking to foster an illusion of popular legitimacy.”

Rainsy alleges that Hun had used “[click farms](#)” to artificially boost his popularity, effectively buying “likes.” The petition says that Hun had achieved astonishing Facebook fame in a very short time, raising questions about whether this popularity was legitimate. For instance, the petition says, Hun Sen’s page is “liked” by [9.4 million people](#) “even though only 4.8 million Cambodians use Facebook,” and that millions of these “likes” come from India, the Philippines, Brazil, and Myanmar, countries that don’t speak Khmer, the sole language the page is written in, and that are known for “click farms.”

According to leaked correspondence that the petition refers to, the Cambodian government’s payments to Facebook totaled \$15,000 a day “in generating fake ‘likes’ and advertising on the network to help disseminate[sic] the regime’s propaganda and drown-out any competing voices.”

Rainsy has been [driven out of the country](#) by the threat of lawsuits and prosecution over statements he made on Facebook about Hun and his inflated popularity. He wants Facebook to provide records of the Cambodian government’s advertising purchases, so he can defend himself in these cases. The petition also says that Hun Sen had violated Facebook’s community guidelines.

While Hun Sen, who has ruled Cambodia for more than 30 years, aggressively promotes his agenda on Facebook, an experiment by the company has limited the reach of other voices on the platform. Cambodia was one of several countries where Facebook [tested the “Explore” feed](#), which pushed news out of user’s News Feeds, limiting the reach of independent news outlets.

Authoritarian leaders have long used tactics to fool the public into thinking support for them is widespread, from putting on massive pro-regime parades and suppressing anti-government demonstrations, to inflating vote tallies in elections. According to the petition, Facebook has become the latest tool to create this illusion of popularity.