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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Cambodia

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Cambodia's government tightened its grip on press freedom in 2012 as the authorities stepped up the use of legal pressure and physical violence to silence journalists. In particular, the 20-year prison sentence imposed on 71-year-old radio station owner Mam Sonando in connection with the station's coverage of land disputes signaled a downturn in media freedom. International radio broadcasters also faced increasing challenges during the year.

Laws regulating the media are vaguely written and unevenly applied. The 1993 constitution guarantees the right to free expression and a free press. However, media personnel are often prosecuted under provisions of the 1995 press law that prohibit reports deemed threatening to political stability. The 2010 penal code, which replaced an older version established by the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), criminalizes defamation and bars written criticism of public officials or institutions. Those convicted of defamation face a potential fine of 10 million riel (\$2,500). The government uses defamation and other criminal charges to intimidate journalists, and the courts lack independence, as most judges are closely tied to the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Cases sometimes linger for years, and individuals are often charged arbitrarily or through the retroactive application of new laws. In July 2012, police arrested Mam Sonando, owner of the independent Beehive Radio, for his outlet's coverage of politically sensitive topics. The station had reported extensively on the military's fatal shooting of a 14-year-old girl during a crackdown on land disputes in Kratie Province. Prime Minister Hun Sen publicly called for Mam Sonando's arrest after the station reported that the U.S.-based Khmer People Power Movement had filed a case against the government at the International Criminal Court (ICC) over the attack. On October 1, a Cambodian court found the station owner guilty of "insurrection" against the state under the penal code and sentenced him to 20 years in prison.

In late 2011, the government delayed passage of the highly criticized Law on Associations and Nongovernmental Organizations (LANGO), which was expected to fetter the work of grassroots organizations and media outlets. Officials said they would complete the legislation after parliamentary elections that were expected in 2013. Progress on a proposed Access to Information Act remained stalled in 2012. Meanwhile, the National Information Communications Technology Development Authority (NiDA) was drafting a law that, according to activists, could limit internet freedom under the pretense of national security concerns.

Licenses are required for broadcast media, and opposition outlets are often denied radio and television frequencies. Access to international broadcasts like Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Voice of America (VOA), and local independent radio services such as Voice of Democracy, is generally unrestricted. However, on June 1 the Ministry of Information (MOI) ordered RFA- and VOA-affiliated stations to stop broadcasting the evening before and on the day of the June 3 communal elections. In October, government officials summoned representatives of RFA and VOA to a closed-door meeting and reprimanded them for a lack of "professionalism" and cultural sensitivity in their reporting. The meeting was allegedly held in response to the stations' coverage of politically sensitive topics, and RFA declared the reprimand an intimidation tactic. Censorship of online content is also a growing concern. Despite low internet penetration rates, the government has become concerned with the internet's potential as a medium for opposition voices. The Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPTC) has on occasion blocked access to opposition websites.

Physical attacks on journalists increased in 2012. On April 26, a military officer shot and killed Chut Wutty, an environmentalist who was guiding two *Cambodia Daily* journalists as they investigated illegal logging in Koh Kong Province. Hang Serei Odom, a journalist with *Virakchun Khmer Daily*, was found murdered on September 11 in Ratanakiri Province, in the first such case in several years. He had published a story the previous week in which he accused the son of a military commander of timber smuggling. Impunity for past attacks is a concern: the cases of the other 10 journalists murdered since 1993 all remain unsolved.

In Cambodia's highly politicized media environment, most outlets are openly aligned with a political faction, leaving little space for balanced views and journalism conducted in the public interest. The majority of the approximately 20 Khmer-language newspapers in operation are owned by individuals associated with or sympathetic to the ruling party. Editors and owners of opposition-aligned outlets are often pressured financially or legally to close their

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

66

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

23

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

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publications. Only two active opposition newspapers remain. A few English-language publications such as the *Phnom Penh Post* exist, but the French-language *Cambodge Soir* shut down in 2010 due to financial difficulties.

Most television and radio stations—the main sources of information for the two-thirds of the population who are functionally illiterate—are owned or controlled by either the CPP or Hun Sen's family and associates. Cambodia's poor economy presents further financial challenges to opening and operating independent media institutions. Due to the low literacy rate, print media are often unable to attract enough advertising to be financially sustainable. Journalists' pay is very low, and accepting bribes to run or withhold particular stories is not uncommon.

Owing to infrastructural and economic constraints, only 5 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2012. In February 2012 the government issued a circular requiring internet cafés to register users and maintain surveillance on internet activity. The MPTC issued a second circular in November that restricted the permissible locations for internet cafés and the activities of café patrons.

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