

CID Newsletter of Democracy

The newsletter for April to May 2024 highlights the judicial harassment of human rights/environmental defenders, civil society organizations' efforts for social justice, human rights, and press freedom, and the Universal Periodic Review on Cambodia's fourth cycle.

HUMAN RIGHTS/ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS AT RISK: LEGAL HARASSMENT



Mr. Saray Koet is an active human rights and environmental defender in Cambodia. He was arrested around 4 PM on April 5, 2024, at the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association (KSILA), where he served as the President. The arrest was made based on the order of the Deputy Prosecutor of the Phnom Penh Capital Court. He is charged with *incitement to commit a felony or to disturb social security*, and another charge of *committing a misdemeanor after sentencing for a misdemeanor*. On April 7, 2024, he was sent to pre-trial detention at Prey Sar Prison. The charges stem from Mr. Saray's support for a community in Preh Vihea province who faced forced eviction with their houses burned to the ground regarding a land dispute involving Seladamex Co., Ltd.

Following Saray's arrest, 56 civil society organizations called for the release and drop of the charge as they hold the view that Saray's interview with the media after he visited the disputed area was a form of expression of his concern about people's livelihoods and call for resolution from relevant authorities. His calls should have been regarded as input to help tackle the conflict rather than incitement. The rights group noted that the arrest was intended to suppress the right to freedom of expression and oppress human rights and environmental defenders. These actions are perceived as severe violations of the fundamental rights stated in the Constitution. The UN's Human Rights Experts consequently called upon Cambodia's government to end harassment and prosecution against human rights defenders, and civil society actors, said in their press release on 19 April 2024.

Furthermore, another notable case of the charges against members of Mother Nature Cambodia for plotting and insulting the King was considered as a harsh punishment by the European countries including Australia. The European Union and its Member States-Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, and Sweden are profoundly troubled by the escalating persecution and arrests of human rights defenders in Cambodia. The recent verdict against Mother Nature Cambodia's environmental defenders raises grave concerns. The group call up on the Royal Government of Cambodia to preserve democratic standards and respect for human rights, including the right to peaceful protest. The Australia believes that open dialogue and respect for human rights is the great ingredients to advance peace and prosperity in the Kingdom.



The recent conviction of the 10 Environmental Defenders is considered national shaming by Cambodian Rights Groups. The group describes the convictions as baseless and politically motivated, aimed at silencing dissent and discouraging environmental activism. The statement highlights the activists' harsh convictions, including violent arrests, denial of fair trial rights, and separation across different prisons. They call on the Cambodian authorities to overturn the convictions, release these prisoners of interest, and cease their crackdown on human rights, and environmental defenders.

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CAMBODIA'S PRESS FREEDOM: THE PROGRESS?

In the 2024 World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders, Cambodia is ranked 151st among 180 countries, marking a decline of four places from its position in the previous year. Between September 1, 2022, and August 31, 2023, Cambodia faced persistent obstacles to freedom of expression, press freedom, and access to information. Journalists and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) frequently faced repercussions for utilizing these rights in their critical reporting and advocacy work. Consequently, five media licenses were revoked, and 16 journalists faced legal action according to the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.

INDEX 2024		INDEX 2023	
151 / 180		147 / 180	
Score : 34.28		Score : 42.02	
POLITICAL INDICATOR	163 20.21	POLITICAL INDICATOR	156 38.50
ECONOMIC INDICATOR	168 27.55	ECONOMIC INDICATOR	171 27.84
LEGISLATIVE INDICATOR	152 36.32	LEGISLATIVE INDICATOR	135 46.42
SOCIAL INDICATOR	158 32.54	SOCIAL INDICATOR	115 57.27

The Quarterly Report from January to March 2024 by CamboJA provides an overview of the current situation regarding journalism in Cambodia. The report noted that ten cases of harassment were recorded, involving 18 journalists. This includes seven instances of legal intimidation, one case of physical violence, and two cases of journalists being restricted from reporting in public places.

On May 2, 2024, civil society organizations, media associations, and journalists in Cambodia came together to celebrate World Press Freedom Day. During the event, they raised concerns about press restrictions, highlighting issues such as harassment and imprisonment of journalists.

On the contrary, the Ministry of Information released a report on Press Freedom in Cambodia. Out of 341 surveyed journalists, 79.8% rated press freedom as "very good". They asserted that journalists in Cambodia enjoy complete freedom in pursuing their careers. Additionally, 95% agreed that media diversity plays a crucial role in promoting press freedom and freedom of expression. Nevertheless, press freedom in Cambodia faces significant challenges, marked by the closure of several independent media outlets that produce thorough and impactful reporting. Nop Vy, executive director of CamboJA, highlighted the shutdowns of Voice of Democracy (VOD), Lotus Radio, Rasmei Kampuchea newspaper, and the print edition of Phnom Penh Post as key examples. According to Ith Sotheouth, media director at the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM), these closures contribute to a constrained media landscape with limited freedoms. He emphasized the obstacles faced by independent journalists who strive to cover critical social and political issues amid restrictive conditions.

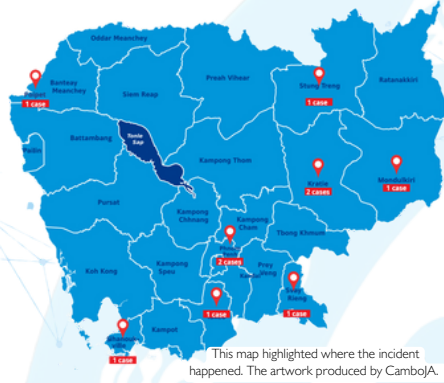
THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW ON CAMBODIA'S FOURTH CYCLE

This year marked the four cycles of the Universal Periodic Review on Cambodia. Through the National Report submitted to the UN Human Rights Council, the Kingdom highlights significant achievements in ratifying human rights treaties, extending international cooperation, and implementing socio-economic development plans, while also establishing a national human rights institution and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. However, the country faces ongoing challenges in improving institutional effectiveness, healthcare, and legal reforms, necessitating continuous efforts and international support. On the contrary, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights's report on Cambodia's human rights situation concerns discrimination against minorities, rights of migrant workers, indigenous people, and persons with disabilities, as well as issues related to freedom of expression, judicial independence, and conditions in detention facilities. The report also highlights the need for legislative and institutional reforms, including establishing a national human rights institution and stronger anti-corruption measures. Additionally, the report of stakeholders' submissions on Cambodia highlights significant human rights issues in Cambodia, including child exploitation and trafficking, threats to Indigenous land rights, discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, political repression, privacy and surveillance concerns, and forced labor and human trafficking.

The concerned actors call for various legal reforms and protections to address these problems and improve the human rights situation in the country.



UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL



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CID in the Media

CamboJA, 2 April 2024, "[Ex-PM Hun Sen Resigns from National Assembly, Moves to Senate with Presidential Voting Fixed on April 3.](#)" Pa Chanroeun, president of the CID said that even though Hun Sen was no longer a prime minister, he still wielded power as the president of the Cambodian People's Party. "We know in the political party system in Cambodia, the party president is powerful, and [here] he is the father of the prime minister [Hun Manet], so he still has influence. When he becomes the Senate president, the role [he holds] is as the acting head of state when the king was absent." He added "Although there are voices from other political parties in the [current] mandate of the Senate, the quota for Senators from those parties is very small. There isn't much hope for their voices to ensure check and balance."

CamboJA, 15 May 2024, "[Cambodian youth called on the government to grant them the freedom and safety to participate in protecting the environment.](#)" Pa Chanroeun, president of CID, expressed the opinion that in order for Cambodian youth to be more involved in addressing environmental issues, they need to be aware of their role and have a broader knowledge of how to protect and solve environmental problems in an effective manner. Additionally, they need to develop a positive mindset and habits for living in society. He emphasized the importance of openness for youth to participate in environmental protection, calling for active involvement from state authorities, civil society organizations, and the private sector. He believes that with good policies and laws from the government, along with regular participation from Cambodian youth, environmental issues can be effectively addressed and environmental protection can be achieved with significant impact.

Phnom Penh Post, 20 May 2024, "[Hun Sen: No room for 'extremists' in a democracy.](#)" Pa Chanroeun, president of CID suggested that some politicians in Cambodia from the opposition and ruling parties have room to improve in respecting democratic principles. He noted that some politicians brought their issues into the political process and used them as grounds to attack each other. He warned that when personal or family issues cause political differences, it can lead to extremism. He also noted that political tolerance appeared to be low, while in a democratic society, different opinions are respected. Regarding the far-right ideology of France's Le Pen in France, he believed that France was cautious in its approach, so as to be mindful of individual rights. Chanroeun suggested that extremism is best prevented when civic education, human rights, and equality are all at a high level, as well as the elimination of any other social issues that may lead to radical behavior.

Phnom Penh Post, 23 May 2024, "[Manet calls for critics to focus on rule of law rather than preconceptions of rights.](#)" Pa Chanroeun, president of CID believed that any country which respects the rule of law must have fair laws and that they must be applied equally to all people with no one above the law, especially regarding the contents of the constitution from 1993. He urged increased political tolerance and called for people to refrain from overreacting to the opinions expressed by anyone, whether politicians, activists or members of the public. "If there is more political tolerance, it will allow the public to participate more widely in the democratic process," he said.

Kiripost, 23 May 2024, "[PM Orders Crackdown on Violent Gang Activities.](#)" Pa Chanroeun, President of the Cambodian Institute for Democracy, stressed the need to eliminate gang activities for public safety. He pointed out that current administrative measures, like imprisonment, are not very effective. Chanroeun urged the government to investigate the root causes of gang behavior, such as alcohol and drug use, school dropouts, and lack of employment opportunities for youth. He recommended establishing programs to educate, reform, and train young people, including gang members. Providing education and skills training can help them build better futures and find employment, ultimately reducing gang activity and promoting safety.

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