The executive director of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR), Chak Sopheap, has said that the COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted restrictions in freedom of expression online.

Sopheap claimed via email that the pandemic has allegedly highlighted restrictions following the sharp increase in the number of ‘fake news’ accusations and arrests that took place during the months of April and May, at the peak of the pandemic.

Sopheap said: “In the last few months journalists have been arrested and news websites’ media licences have been revoked following legitimate reporting activities, activists have been judicially harassed and intimidated for social media posts,” she added, without providing specifics.

According to Sopheap, between April 2019 and March this year, CCHR found that restrictions and violations of online speech accounted for 42 percent and 48 percent of all recorded freedom of expression restrictions and violations respectively.

She said that over 40 people, including journalists, former opposition members and ordinary citizens, were arrested for questioning the government’s handling of the crisis or expressing concern about the virus in online posts.
Sopheap said: “In the last few months journalists have been arrested and news websites’ media licences have been revoked following legitimate reporting activities, activists have been judicially harassed and intimidated for social media posts,” she added.

“Musicians have faced judicial action for sharing songs online in which they sing about border issues or inequality; demonstrating little consideration on behalf of the government for freedom of expression,” Sopheap added.

The assault on free speech cultivates a pervasive culture of self-censorship both online and offline, eroding the right to freedom of expression from within. The internet should be acknowledged as an essential tool for civic engagement and sufficiently protected in parallel, she said.

“Freedom of expression is enshrined in both international and domestic law, and the government is under an obligation to respect and protect it,” she said.

“Freedom of expression must be respected even if it is exercised in pursuit of a cause that the government disagrees with. As long as the government perceives the expression of criticism as a crime, freedom of expression will continue to exist only as a theoretical concept in Cambodia,” she added.

Spokesman of Ministry of Justice, Chin Malin, yesterday said that the government didn’t restrict any freedom of expression during the pandemic and the CCHR didn’t raise any clear laws.

With incitement, it refers to creating controversy and making citizens furious, these are against the laws of the Kingdom, Malin added.

He said: “citizens can post whatever they want, including music, but they must make sure that it’s not violating others’ rights or creating an impact on public order or intentionally having a negative meaning that creates controversy in society.”

Details: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50771091/concern-over-freedom-of-expression-online/?fbclid=IwAR2V7yDxeBKRxR_evnQNZo1nTwcYTbIZv8MYInih-kfFbacWNI6Tzo8Pckw