VoD Shuttered After PM Rejects Apology over News Report

Independent media outlet, Voice of Democracy, has had its license revoked after Hun Sen rejected an apology regarding a story that Hun Manet signed an aid agreement for the earthquake in Turkey.

The Ministry of Information on Monday revoked the media license of Voice of Democracy (VoD), a major independent outlet in Cambodia, saying it has seriously violated journalism professionalism, hurt the government’s honor and prestige, and refused to correct a news report.

The revoke comes after an order by Prime Minister Hun Sen on Sunday to shut down VoD after a Khmer article said his eldest son Hun Manet had signed a document with $100,000 for aid to Turkey for the earthquake.
Hun Sen gave VoD 72 hours, and later 24 hours, to apologize or be shuttered. Chhorn Sokunthea, acting director of Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) which runs VoD, sent a letter to Hun Sen, apologizing for the confusion and that the VoD journalist had cited a government spokesperson for the story.

Hun Sen did not accept the letter as an apology and ordered the Ministry to shut VoD down, called on police to keep order and protect properties of the news organization, and urged staff to find work elsewhere.

“On behalf of the Royal Government to be protected, my honor, I decided to end the story by ordering the Ministry of Information to cancel VoD’s license from now on and must be completed by 10:00 a.m., February 13, 2023,” Hun Sen said on his official Facebook page.

“Please Phnom Penh Capital Hall and relevant institutions, help protect the order and property of this radio. We only cancel all broadcasts of this radio only, but we do not affect their property,” he added.

“Foreign friends who give money to this radio, transfer money back to your country or help other countries. Staff who work at this radio, please find a job elsewhere,” he said.

In a second letter after the shutdown, Sokunthea posted another letter, this time apologizing to Hun Sen and Manet. However, Hun Sen refused to accept the apology and said it must be shut down.
VoD, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last month, has been known for its reporting on tough issues, including factory strikes and lately online scams. On social media, supporters expressed their sadness and shock to learn of the shutdown. Some have launched a #SaveVoD hashtag. Others have changed their social media profiles.

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, said on her Facebook post, alongside the #SaveVoD, that VoD has brought real information to the people and government, and the government has responded positively to some issues, as reported by VoD.
“I hope the Prime Minister will be generous in reconsidering this decision, as this will seriously affect the freedom of the press, which the government claims is free,” Sopheap said.

“This will affect VoD's active team that they are not at fault for just fulfilling their profession. In addition, this loss will be a loss to the government, which can have a voice and a mirror to strengthen governance as the government wants,” she added in her post.

Researcher Ou Rithy said on Twitter that closing VoD gives little hope for democracy in the country in general, and for the upcoming general elections in July.

“Pls express love for the Voice of Democracy by reconsidering #SaveVOD,” Rithy tweeted.

Mech Dara, one of VoD’s journalists, tweeted with images of crying emojis.

“Is this fate?” he asked. “This is too much for me, I cannot handle this anymore,” Dara said.

Gerry Flynn, president of Overseas Press Club of Cambodia (OPCC), said in a tweet that this is a huge loss just as the national election looms, a time when information will be crucial. “Grim times ahead,” he said.

Phil Robertson, Deputy Asia Director, Human Rights Watch on the Cambodia, said in a statement on Monday that the real losers are the people of Cambodia, who have now “lost one of the last remaining independent muckraking, anti-corruption media outlets that stood up for the interests of people and communities fighting to keep their land, livelihoods, and rights against the pernicious corrupt government officials and cronies”.

“The effort to reverse the government’s shut down of VoD should be a rallying cry for media freedom and good governance in Cambodia that continues all the way to the national election and beyond,” Robertson added.