Cambodian independent media outlet VOD shut down by Prime Minister Hun Sen ahead of election

Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen has shut down one of the country's leading independent media outlets, Voice of Democracy (VOD), ahead of national elections in July.

Key points:

- The prime minister took issue with an article about Cambodian aid to Türkiye
- VOD was at the forefront of reporting on slavery compounds and human trafficking in Cambodia
- The sudden closure comes months ahead of Cambodia's national election

On Sunday night he ordered the Ministry of Information to revoke the publisher's licence, meaning it would no longer be able to broadcast or publish in English or Khmer after 10am on Monday, local time.
Ananth Baliga, VOD English associate editor, said ministry and police officials visited the outlet’s offices on Monday morning.

The officials presented a Ministry of Information document ordering the journalists to stop publishing.

Several local internet service providers also appeared to block access to the Khmer and English sites within the country.

"The staff at VOD right now are in a state of shock," Mr Baliga said.

"It's been a very short time frame."

VOD was one of the few independent news websites left in the country, and the latest move echoes steps the government took ahead of the last election to shut down independent news outlets and curtail press freedom.

Ahead of the 2018 national election, several radio stations were closed down and the government ordered others not to report Khmer-language news from Voice of America and Radio Free Asia.

The Cambodia Daily shut down after being ordered to pay a disputed tax bill and the Phnom Penh Post was sold to a PR firm with links to the government.

VOD reporter Mech Dara, who previously worked at both the Daily and the Post, said it was "difficult to digest" the closure of yet another independent media outlet.

"It happened again and again," he said.

"It's too quick, too fast and unexpected, unbelievable and unimaginable."

"We've done a lot of things to fight for the justice, for the poor, fight for the truth ... it's really sad and depressing."

He said VOD had published investigations on corruption and cyber-scam slavery, holding government officials to account.

"The key thing is the election is coming," he said.

"We don't know how much this has to do with the upcoming election but the public can make their own judgement."
What was the reason for the closure?

The prime minister took issue with an article published by VOD last week, which he alleged harmed the "dignity and reputation" of the government.

The story was about Cambodian aid to Türkiye following the devastating earthquake.

Hun Manet has been tipped for succession by his father, Hun Sen.\textit{(Reuters: Franck Robichon)}

It quoted government spokesman Phay Siphan saying that the prime minister's son, Hun Manet, had signed the aid agreement — which would have appeared to overstep his position as the joint chief of staff and deputy commander of Cambodia's armed forces.

"Commentators tried to attack me and my son Hun Manet," the prime minister wrote on Facebook.

Hun Sen has been in power for 38 years, making him one of the world's longest-ruling leaders.
He has tipped his eldest son, Hun Manet, to succeed him, although Hun Sen plans to stand for election for the ruling Cambodian People's Party in July.

The Cambodian Centre for Independent Media (CCIM), the NGO that runs VOD, sent a letter apologising for any confusion it might have caused and explaining that VOD had quoted a government official.

Hun Sen said the response was unacceptable.

**Newspaper boss blocked from leaving**

The newspaper general manager must stay in the country until the company pays an $8 million tax bill.

Naly Pilorge, from Cambodian human rights NGO Licadho, said it was "another terrible day" for the country.

"The hope for an open society, democracy, and accountability all rely on a free press," she said.
"If Voice of Democracy (VOD) is permanently shut, it will leave a gaping hole in Cambodia’s media landscape, which has already been decimated by systematic government attacks over the past years, and is facing increasing repression ahead of the July National Election."

Mr Baliga said VOD journalists were thinking about how to deal with the situation.

"World over, it's a common trend that governments, the elite, and people in positions of power do not like accountability," Mr Baliga said.

"They are allergic to a free press. I don't see why that would be different in Cambodia."

**VOD exposed cyber-scam slavery**

Sebastian Strangio, author of Hun Sen's Cambodia and South-East Asia editor at The Diplomat, said Cambodian crackdowns had historically been tied to the electoral cycle.

He said in the vacuum left by the crackdown on outlets including the Daily and the Post, VOD had picked up the baton and carried on their legacy, absorbing some of their journalistic talent.

"My hope was that they would, having secured their hold on power, allow VOD to continue to operate," he said.

"My guess is that they're unhappy with some of VOD's recent reporting," he said, but added the article singled out by the prime minister was "fairly innocuous".

He said it may have been mentioned to deflect attention away from the issue of cyber slavery and trafficking, which VOD covered extensively, or it could have struck a nerve about the legitimacy of Hun Sen's succession plan.

"Anything to do with succession is politically sensitive," he said, adding the government was seemingly "paranoid" about the upcoming election, and had also clamped down on the opposition Candlelight party.

Strangio said VOD was out in front of other media outlets in exposing cyber-scam slavery compounds.

"The government was embarrassed by a lot of the reporting on this, partly because it identified certain prominent tycoons as having links to these scam operations," he said.
"The Cambodian government downplayed the severity of all of this, and then it increasingly became a diplomatic issue, as Asian embassies began warning their nationals not to take jobs in Cambodia for fear of being trafficked."

Jacob Sims, country director for International Justice Mission Cambodia, said: "VOD's courageous, high-quality investigative journalism serves as a consistent voice for truth and justice on behalf of exploited and voiceless populations in Cambodia."

"In particular, VOD reporters have played a leading role in bringing to light a massive industry of criminality and violent labour exploitation occurring within scam compounds across the country," he said.

Australia's new ambassador to Cambodia, Justin Whyatt, wrote on Twitter that he was "concerned" about the closure and hoped VOD could resume operations.

"An independent media is vital in a democracy and helps many voices to be heard," he said.

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs added: "Australia will continue to advocate for press freedoms in Cambodia, including the reopening of Voice of Democracy."

Chak Sopheap, executive director at the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, said the shutdown was the latest in "a series of anti-democratic moves".
She said as long as the government "perceives the expression of criticism as a crime, freedom of expression will continue to exist only as a mere aspiration in Cambodia".

Reporters without Borders (RSF) condemned the Cambodian regime's decision and called for the outlet to be immediately reinstated, saying: "VOD plays a vital role in protecting the last vestiges of media pluralism in the country."

"This arbitrary decision sends a truly ominous message for press freedom ahead of the upcoming July elections," Rebecca Vincent, RSF's director of operations and campaigns, said.

Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said Hun Sen had an authoritarian attitude towards independent media, and the "ridiculous order to shut them down" was "based on the silliest of rationales".