After the government shuttered independent media Voice of Democracy (VOD) on Monday, dozens of civil society groups decried the decision and numerous embassies warned the loss of the publication seriously damaged Cambodia’s dwindling press freedom in the run-up to the July national election.

VOD staff and supporters gathered tearfully at the organization’s office in Phnom Penh, while district authorities and Information Ministry officials delivered a letter formally revoking the publication’s media license on Monday morning.

“We will be silent, we will not continue our broadcasting,” said Ith Sotheoeuth, media director for the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM), VOD’s parent organization, though he added the organization was still searching for a solution.

More than 90 civil society organizations, including CamboJA News’ parent organization Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association, signed a statement Monday stating they
were “deeply disturbed” by the decision to shut down VOD. The statement also condemned social media misogyny directed towards a female VOD journalist involved in the report which drew the Prime Minister’s ire.

Access to VOD’s website and servers have also been blocked by some mobile and internet service providers, the statement also noted.

The European Union Delegation to Cambodia, along with the Australian, American, British, French, German and Swedish embassies issued statements Monday expressing concern about the closure of VOD.

“We are deeply troubled by the abrupt decision to revoke Voice of Democracy’s (VOD) media license,” the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh stated Monday. “We urge Cambodian authorities to revisit this decision.”

“This decision seriously undermines media freedom and pluralism, which are essential for any open and free society,” The European Union in Cambodia stated. “Access of information and freedom of speech are basic tenets of a democratic society and the foundation for free and fair elections. These rights are enshrined in Cambodia’s Constitution and should be fully protected.”
On Saturday, Prime Minister Hun Sen gave VOD 72 hours — later shortened to 24 hours — to issue a retraction and apology for a February 9 Khmer language report stating that his son, Lieutenant General Hun Manet, had signed an authorization of aid to Turkey. Government spokesperson Phay Siphan was quoted as saying “it is not wrong for Hun Manet to play his father’s role in providing aid to Turkey.”

VOD later noted Hun Manet’s denial in a follow-up article and CCIM expressed “regret” and asked for “forgiveness” on Sunday. After midnight Sunday, CCIM issued a second statement formally apologizing to Hun Sen and Hun Manet.

“VOD really apologizes to Samdech [Hun Sen] as well as His Excellency Hun Manet for publishing this article,” the second letter, signed by CCIM’s acting director Chhorn Sokuthea, stated.

But the Prime Minister rejected the publication’s attempts to reconcile the situation.

“We really are not children,” Hun Sen wrote at 2 a.m. on Facebook. “Why not apologize [earlier] in the evening… After one slap they… apologize at midnight.”

“For people losing their jobs, they should blame their leader or whichever country funds them, they made mistakes publishing slanderous, stupid news and haven't got the responsibility to say sorry, making people lose their jobs,” he added.
Military police and government officials leave VOD’s office after delivering a Ministry of Information letter revoking the publication’s license as of 10 a.m. on February 13, 2023. (CamboJA/Pring Samrang)

The Ministry of Information’s letter revoking VOD’s license explained that the outlet “seriously violated journalists’ professional rights and prestige by impacting the honor of the royal government and [CCIM] did not make a correction in provision of the Press Law.”

Article 10 of Cambodia’s Press Law gives people a right to request a retraction and reply from publishers within seven days or else take legal action in court. But these avenues were not followed prior to the outright closure of the publication, human rights organization Licadho noted in a statement.

Across social media, loyal readers had urged the government to reconsider and “Save VOD” and some, like environmental activist Phuong Keoreaksmey, gathered outside the organization’s headquarters.

“I am still requesting [the government] reinstate the license for VOD. Please continue operation VOD to serve the national interest,” she said.

A group of human right activists gather in front of VOD’s office in protest against the government’s decision to revoke VOD’s license on February 13, 2023. (CamboJA/Pring Samrang)
The government previously forced the closure of leading English language outlet The Cambodia Daily in 2017 due to outstanding tax payments, along with the sale of the Daily’s counterpart, The Phnom Penh Post, to a government-aligned owner.

Senior VOD reporter Nhim Sokhorn, a security guard turned journalist, said the shutdown of VOD was part of a broader pattern of pre-election suppression of independent media and civil society which had also occurred in the run-up to the 2018 elections.

“Now it is the upcoming 2023 elections, we see this problem facing VOD,” he said. “And if we see the past issue and compare it to right now, it is the same strategy [crack down independent media].”

Yet Sokhorn, who has worked at VOD for 16 years, said reporters have not been formally laid off by management and he hopes there is still a chance the publication can continue to operate in some way.

“I think that VOD has helped society a lot for 20 years so far, and I am in sorrow that the government decided to shut it down,” Sokhorn said. “When losing this voice [independent media] the government also lost one source of realm truthful information.”

Information Ministry secretary of state Pen Bona claimed VOD had not tried hard enough to verify Hun Manet’s actions, despite the fact a government spokesperson was quoted in the article confirming his role. Bona said the Information Ministry met with VOD to try to discuss a solution but said the Prime Minister had considered the report’s allegations “misleading.”

“This flimsy and absurd decision barely masks the government’s real intent to further suppress media freedom,” said Human Rights Watch Deputy Asia Director Phil Robertson in a statement.

“The international community needs to wake from its slumber over Cambodia,” Robertson added. “There needs to be an urgent campaign of public pressure on PM Hun Sen and his government to respect rights, or risk be[ing] termed as a failed democracy — and treated that way in terms of aid and trade.”

Agriculture Minister Dith Tina, who last year had threatened to sue the paper for reporting farmers’ complaints, implied VOD had gotten what it deserved.

“Once upon of time, we did tell them what was right and what was wrong,” he wrote on Twitter. “Has they learned ? Hopefully, this time.”
A group of human right activists gather in front of VOD’s office in protest against the government’s decision to revoke VOD’s license on February 13, 2023. (CamboJA/Pring Samrang)

“As long as the RGC [Royal Government of Cambodia] perceives the expression of criticism as a crime, freedom of expression will continue to exist only as a mere aspiration in Cambodia,” said Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.

CCIM’s Sothoeuth said the organization is still trying to figure out how to support its more than 40 staff and will strive to carry on in some capacity.

“We will try our best to work with relevant stakeholders to operate VOD and continue providing credible news to Cambodian people,” he said. “If VOD cannot continue forward, we consider this is a backward step for the media sector in Cambodia.”

(Additional reporting by Runn Sreydeth and Phon Sotthyroth)