Hun Sen Closes a Last Remaining Independent Media Voice
With national elections looming in July, Cambodia’s strongman says no to opposition media

Long-ruling Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen’s February 12 order to the Ministry of Information to revoke the license of Voice of Democracy (VoD), one of the last remaining independent media outlets in the country, follows a disturbing pattern of the one-party state looking for an excuse to crack down on critical media ahead elections expected in July to avoid scrutiny.

The reasoning for the revocation, which came into effect the next day, was based on a story that reported that his son and successor, General Hun Manet, granted aid money to Turkey, when only the PM has the authority to do so – although a government spokesman seemingly confirmed the VoD’s report. The prime minister alleged that the story was false, and hurt “the dignity and
reputation” of the Cambodian government, given that Hun Manet, as a military commander, doesn’t have the authority to approve foreign aid.

Although the VOD’s parent organization, the Cambodian Center for Independent Media, issued a last-ditch letter apologizing to the government, its media license was revoked regardless.

At face value, the reasoning for the shuttering of the media outlet is bizarre. However, with a national election slated for July, long-time observers noted the news follows

“The Cambodian government never liked VoD’s reporting, and given Prime Minister Hun Sen’s authoritarian attitude towards independent media it’s likely VoD have been living on borrowed time for quite a while,” Human Rights Watch Deputy Director Phil Robertson told Asia Sentinel. “But that’s no excuse for this outrageous, and frankly ridiculous, order to shut them down based on the silliest of rationales about who signed an order to give aid to Turkey.”

Hun Sen is one of the world’s longest ruling leaders, having been in power for the past 38 years, spending much of that time bending or breaking the country’s institutions to his will.

Robertson noted that the PM and his Cambodian People’s Party usually crack down hard on independent voices in the advance of a national election, adding that it was a clear indication that the upcoming ballot would neither be free nor fair.

The development comes after the shuttering of the Cambodia Daily in 2017 and the sale of the Phnom Penh Post to a pro-government PR organization ahead of the national elections in 2018, that saw the country’s opposition, the Cambodian National Rescue Party, outlawed.

Sebastian Stangio, Southeast Asia editor at the Diplomat and author of Hun Sen’s Cambodia, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that VOD had
helped fill the void that was left behind following the closure of the Daily and the poisoning of the Post.

“My hope was that they would, having secured their hold on power, and allowed VOD to continue to operate,” he said.

Robertson said the real losers in all of this 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 losing land, livelihoods, and rights to the pernicious corruption that underpins just about everything Hun Sen’s government does.”

In recent years VOD covered the explosion of modern slavery and human exploitation in the country that occurred in the shadow of the pandemic, as the scam industry took root under the government’s rule.

“VoD has been at the forefront of exposing official complicity in the human trafficking and cyber-scam syndicates that have made Cambodia synonymous with the latest sinister form of 21st century slavery,” Robertson said.

Strangio said the government had become embarrassed by a lot of the reporting, given that it identified certain prominent tycoons as having links to these scam operations.

“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,” he said.

Mercy Barends, chairperson of the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) said the global community must denounce the government’s actions, describing them as authoritarian tactics.

“Until the government allows independent journalism to flourish in the country, releases all political prisoners, and allows opposition parties to express their
political views without fear of reprisals, any elections held in Cambodia will be just a farce,” she said.

APHR noted the government has also used the pandemic to introduce harsh new penalties to prosecute journalist and social media users that question or criticize government policies.

It has also gone out of its way to use the courts to arrest and silence the remnants of the Cambodian National Rescue Party.

Cambodian Center for Human Rights Executive Director Sopheap Chak told Asian Sentinel that VoD’s closure was the latest in a series of anti-democratic moves threatening freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information in the country.

“The dire state of freedom of expression in Cambodia, the increasing crackdown on independent media outlets, political opposition, and those who are critical of the government, the physical and judicial harassment of independent voices for conducting their job legitimately, including license revokes as in the case of VOD, exacerbate a context of repression and intimidation, discouraging people from exercising this fundamental freedom,” she said.

“As long as the [Cambodian government] perceives the expression of criticism as a crime, freedom of expression will continue to exist only as a mere aspiration in Cambodia.”

There were hopes by some previously that the Cambodian government would need to maintain some façade of democracy to ensure that lucrative trade deals with the European Union were restored, after the country’s economy was devastated by the loss of tourists during the pandemic.

The EU delegation to Cambodia took to Facebook, Monday to say they were “deeply concerned” about the government’s decision to revoke VOD’s licence to operate.
“This decision seriously undermines media freedom and pluralism, which are essential for any open and free society. Access to information and freedom of speech are basic tenets of a democratic society and the foundation for free and fair elections,” it wrote. “These rights are enshrined in Cambodia’s Constitution and should be fully protected.”

Robertson said the international community needed to “wake from its slumber over Cambodia”.

“There needs to be an urgent campaign of public pressure on PM Hun Sen and his government to respect rights, or risk be termed as a failed democracy – and treated that way in terms of aid and trade,” he said. “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.”