Cambodian NGOs urge legal action over 'misogynistic' bullying

Woman journalist 'insulted and harassed' by a well-known media commentator as VOD is shuttered

An employee cries at the office of online media outlet Voice of Democracy (VOD) in Phnom Penh on Feb. 13 after Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said the media outlet would have its operating license revoked. (Photo: AFP)

A group of 40 non-government organizations (NGOs) has urged the Cambodian government to take legal action against a well-known media commentator for “misogynistic” online attacks on a reporter amid the shutting down of an independent news outlet.
The diverse group included trade unions, human rights groups, Transparency International, Action Aid and Cambodian Youth Network who were angered by Pheng Vannak and a barrage of insults that were aimed at a female reporter from Voice of Democracy (VOD).

Of the many offensive quotes attributed to Pheng Vannak, the group of 40 singled out: “As a pretty young girl, but with a wild character… With such a cheap character, whoever marries you, would be finished….”

The comments were made amid outbursts and bullying online following an order from Prime Minister Hun Sen to shut down VOD after a disputed quote was published in regard to an aid package for Turkey. VOD’s license was then revoked.

It asked that government ministers “take firm legal action against Mr. Pheng Vannak to provide justice to the woman who is being abused and persecuted and to set a good example in society.”

“We are deeply disturbed that Mr. Pheng Vannak has recently posted misogynistic comments on his personal Facebook page [Vannak Pheng] that insulted and harassed a woman journalist,” the group of 40 said in a statement.

It said his statements were a severe violation of professional ethics in journalism and a breach of the Media Code of Conduct, forged by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Information in July 2017 for Reporting on Violence Against Women.

“These statements have seriously affected the dignity of individuals and degraded women and society,” they said.
According to a 2021 report by the Ministry of Information, only 470 out of 5,000 journalists in Cambodia, or about 9.4 percent, are women.

Many have faced threats and harassment.

“Some have reported that such a working environment affects their physical and mental health, affects their ability to perform their journalistic profession, and may discourage other women from entering the media profession,” the group said.

The closure of VOD — among the last independent news outfits to survive a six-year crackdown on dissent — has caused an international backlash with the United States and Australia leading calls for a reinstatement of its license.

Hun Sen has also alleged foreign interference within VOD, whose license was held by the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM).

CCIM’s financial supporters include Dan Church Aid, the German NGO Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, and the US-based Christian advocacy group Bread for the World.

In a separate statement, the Overseas Press Club of Cambodia (OPCC) said “the closure of VOD and the harassment of a female VOD journalist undermine the government’s own claims regarding respect for the free press in Cambodia.