Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has been in power for nearly 40 years, has revoked the license of news outlet Voice of Democracy (VOD) for publishing an article that allegedly violated journalism ethics and harmed the reputation of the nation. Media groups have condemned the forced closure of VOD, one of Cambodia’s last remaining independent media platforms. VOD has been a content partner of Global Voices since 2019.

VOD posted a news story on February 9 quoting government spokesperson Phay Siphan, saying that Hun Manet, deputy commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and the son of Hun Sen, had signed a government budget contribution of USD 100,000 to support earthquake relief efforts in
Turkey and Syria. Hun Manet is expected to succeed his father as leader of the ruling party ahead of the July elections this year.

But Hun Manet denied that he signed the document mentioned in the VOD article. VOD published a follow-up article which included Hun Manet's statement. Later, Hun Sen imposed a 72-hour deadline for VOD to issue an apology. He changed the deadline to 24 hours before issuing an order to revoke VOD’s license. He rejected the statement VOD issued in apology, deeming it insincere.

The Overseas Press Club of Cambodia wrote that it was “a dark and disturbing day for Cambodia and for press freedom” as it joined media and civil society groups in expressing concern over VOD’s shutdown. The joint statement signed by more than 90 groups urged authorities to uphold media freedom and the rule of law:

Prime Minister Hun Sen’s arbitrary deadline signals a serious threat to all independent media and journalists in Cambodia.

We call on the government to resolve the issue in a calm, professional and respectful manner that is in line with Cambodian law and that does not do lasting damage to Cambodia’s media landscape. We believe that the closure of VOD would represent a grave step backwards for both press freedoms and the rule of law in Cambodia.

They reminded the government that the country’s law allows a publisher to issue a correction or retraction seven days after a complaint is filed. The complainant can also sue for defamation or libel.

The sudden closure of VOD was compared to the shutdown of Cambodia Daily, which ceased operations in 2017 after it was slapped with several tax violation charges. Another independent media outlet that encountered government pressure was Phnom Penh Post, which continued until it was sold to a new owner in 2018. Veteran journalist Mech Dara, who has worked for these media outlets, noted how the government has consistently silenced the work of independent media:

But the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation insisted that the government did the right thing in revoking the license of VOD and that it will help promote the journalism profession in the country:
An administrative action against a rule-breaking entity does not merit any worry at all. What should be alarming is the mounting disinformation and intentional slanders, which undermine the essence and principles of human rights and freedoms.

The move against an unprofessional media outlet does not undermine the vibrant press freedom in the Kingdom, but contributes to the strengthening of profession of journalism.

Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith added that other media outlets should learn from the experience of VOD:

It is a lesson learned for other media institutions...The media institutions that do not agree to publish clarifications, [they] will face the revocation of their licenses.

News about the closure of VOD prompted its readers and media freedom advocates to express support online through the social media hashtag #SaveVOD.

Journalists from other news companies and civil society groups congregated at VOD’s office to offer support and show solidarity:

Human rights groups noted that VOD's reporting is essential in covering the trials of political prisoners. Many state-affiliated papers are unable or unwilling to criticize the government or go against state narratives:

The VOD newsroom saw reporters comforting each other after it became evident that the prime minister would not reverse his decision:

Meanwhile, the prime minister’s office assured VOD journalists that they can find new jobs in the government

VOD digital editor Sreinith Ten has a reply to this offer:

Choosing a career is not as simple as changing clothes, let alone building a career path that has been shaping your values and world perspectives. What has been earned and built for individuals who strive for the public interests cannot be easily replaced by a given job #SaveVoD

The United Nations Human Rights office and the embassies of the United States, France, Germany, Australia, United Kingdom, and Sweden have released statements urging Cambodia to renew VOD’s license.
Cambodia has a poor freedom of press track record, with a rating of 142 out of 180 in 2022, according to the [Reporters Without Borders press freedom report](https://www.reporterswithoutborders.org/en/cambodia). Freedom of expression further deteriorated during the pandemic as the Hun Sen government used the state of emergency to silence critics.

In 2022, media groups assailed the harassment of reporters who were covering labor protests. They [recorded](https://www.reporterswithoutborders.org/en/cambodia) at least 57 cases of intimidation and attacks targeting journalists during the first ten months of the year. Authorities have also weaponized existing [cybercrime laws](https://www.reporterswithoutborders.org/en/cambodia) to block [critical content](https://www.reporterswithoutborders.org/en/cambodia) and to arrest individuals accused of [insulting](https://www.reporterswithoutborders.org/en/cambodia) government officials. The crackdown on dissenting voices has also intensified as politically-motivated charges were [filed](https://www.reporterswithoutborders.org/en/cambodia) against opposition leaders ahead of the July elections. The closure of VOD would deprive the public of a credible and independent source of information about the actions of the ruling party and other key issues that could influence the coming elections.