Civil Society Calls for VOD To Be Reinstated During Press Day Remarks

Ahead of World Press Freedom Day, civil society groups called on the government to allow the independent media outlet VOD to reopen, noting that the country’s press freedom continues to worsen.

“I hope the Prime Minister will kindly consider [reopening VOD],” said Cambodia Center for Human Right executive director Chak Sopheap, during a panel discussion to discuss press freedom in Phnom Penh on May 2, one day before World Press Freedom Day.
“[We] can say that it was one mistake that VOD committed wrong, but VOD has already apologized,” she said.

In February, 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, Hun Manet, had signed an authorization of aid to Turkey. Though the outlet issued both an apology and retraction, its license was revoked on February 13.

Speaking to participants at Tuesday’s event, Information Ministry spokesperson Meas Sophorn insisted that the shutdown of VOD was not a reflection of broader issues surrounding press freedom.

“I would like to affirm that the shutdown of VOD does not kill press freedom in Cambodia,” he said, noting that in the case of VOD, the government was simply following the law.

But advocates insist VOD did nothing to justify having their license revoked and say that the closure has had a chilling effect for other Cambodian media outlets.

“After ordering to close VOD, how many media outlets dare to report about the demonstrations, and strikes?” said Cambodia Center for Independent Media’s acting executive director Chhan Sokunthea.

She added that since the shutdown, few media institutions are reporting on “sensitive issues” like land disputes, natural resource grabs, and worker protests.

“As we know, near elections independent media are always restricted or closed,” Sokhunthea said.

She said the number of journalists who report on sensitive issues have declined since 2017, amid crackdowns on independent media like Radio Free Asia, The Cambodia Daily, and VOD. RFA saw two former reporters arrested on espionage charges in 2017, while the Cambodia Daily shut down in 2017 after being handed a massive tax bill that it called politically motivated.
Sok Lyhour, an intern at CCIM, said he supported calls for VOD to be reopened.

“We see that the media in Cambodia does not seem to have freedom of press,” Lyhour said, adding that he sees colleagues facing emotional stress over the pressures facing the media.

“We have very few independent media outlets left in Cambodia, very few people can speak. What I want is that there are more independent media so that people who cannot voice their concerns can have their voices heard,” said Hang Samphors, team leader of the Cambodian Female Journalists Network.

Cambodia’s Press Situation
In its last annual report, Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA) said the situation facing the press remains one of “deep concern,” despite fewer attacks on journalists last year.

In 2022, CamboJA recorded 35 cases of harassment—including physical attacks, threats of violence, discrimination, arrest, imprisonment, and other legal actions—against 54 journalists. That total case count marked a 28 percent decrease from 2021, when it documented 49 cases of harassment against 96 journalists.

Sophorn said that the government has continued to promote press freedom in Cambodia.

“The implementation of the right to freedom of the press shows that we have seen a good situation in carrying out their duty of national and foreign journalists who are working in our Cambodia,” he said, adding that Cambodians can access media through all sources, even TikTok, which has been banned in India while many other countries are discussing bans.

But other speakers at the event said such statements did not reflect the reality of press freedom in Cambodia.

Carmen Moreno, EU ambassador to Cambodia, said the media here faces many of the challenges seen across the globe.

“Unfortunately, over the last years, we have seen a steady decline of press freedom and freedom of expression all over the world, including Cambodia, including in my country in Spain,” she said.

“We are suffering from the proliferation of disinformation, disinformation and hate speech, multiplied by digital technologies and social networks. We are witnessing media capture and media monopolies established by government’s economic powers and political powers,” she said.
Members of civil society, government representatives, and journalists gather at a World Press Freedom day event in Phnom Penh on May 2, 2023. CamboJA/Pring Samrang