Government Urged to Promote Freedom of the Press

To mark Press Freedom Day, journalists and civil society organizations gathered to call on the government to protect and promote freedom of the press.

Cambodia marked the 30th Press Freedom Day with the participation of civil society organizations, diplomats, journalists and Ministry of Information representatives.
Civil societies and journalists urged the government to protect and promote press freedom as independent journalists face many challenges.

Nop Vy, Executive Director of Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA), said during the opening remarks of the 30th celebration of Press Freedom Day that freedom of expression and freedom of press should be given more attention and space as it can benefit the public interest and government. He added that independent media has played an important role for the citizens in accessing information.

“Freedom of expression is another driving force of human rights, a topic we have discussed and promoted to get more attention from stakeholders. Enabling press freedom is the most important factor that can promote freedom of expression, which is an important pillar in the process of growing democracy,” he said.

He mentioned that freedom of the press has been restricted since 2017 and many independent media have faced challenges.

“However, the decline of press freedom since 2017 and the continuation of independent sources, for example, Voice of Democracy (VOD) has narrowed its reach to vulnerable sources of information
and reliable sources of information in promoting accountability and justice in society,” he mentioned.

Chhan Sokunthea, Acting Executive Director of Cambodia Center for Independent Media (CCIM), spoke at the Press Freedom Day event. She said after the shuttering of VOD, there were not many local media reports about the sensitive issue.

“Cambodia has celebrated World Press Freedom Day since 1996, however, how many media outlets dare to report about sensitive issues? For example, land disputes, demonstrations of garment or labor workers. I raise this point because after the urging to shut down VOD, so not many media outlets dare to report about the demonstrations. Yesterday, there was an NGO working on labor rights and many media outlets that reported on labor rights or the workers’ demand for their rights,” she said.

Chak Sopheap, Executive Director of Cambodia Center for Human Rights (CCHR), also a speaker at the event, said that she hopes that the government will reconsider reopening VOD as in the past politicians have written apology letters to the Prime Minister and later been promoted to work in ministries.
“I suggest that in order to ensure the freedom of the press, [the Prime Minister], the relevant institutions should review the decision,” she said.

Sopheap mentioned that if the government has the intention of protecting and promoting freedom of the press, they should reconsider the closing of VOD because it has given lots of opportunities to citizens who are voiceless, as well as political parties.

Spokesperson of the Ministry of Information, Meas Sophorn, said at the event that the freedom of the press in Cambodia remains good. Regarding the closure of VOD, he said that it did not kill freedom of the press in Cambodia.

"I would like to reiterate that the closure of VOD does not kill freedom in Cambodia. Freedom of the press is guaranteed by the Constitution and the Press Law of the Kingdom of Cambodia," he said.

On May 2, 13 civil societies issued a joint statement urging the government and relevant partners to continue paying attention to six points, including ensuring a free, peaceful and secure environment for journalists and the press, and to perform professional duties without restrictions and fears, especially during and after the parliamentary elections in July.
Civil societies also called for an end to all forms of harassment of media outlets and journalists who dare to report issues. Inactivity or other sensitive issues in society and release any journalists who are imprisoned for their professional work as journalists In particular, and to stop using the law to punish journalists.