Cambodia’s dark history a pall over govt surveillance plans

Government critics and human rights advocates say Cambodia’s push to introduce facial recognition surveillance could be used against political opponents. Authorities could use facial recognition systems to identify and track individuals and gather vast amounts of personal data leading, Chak Sopheap, director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, told government-funded content publisher Voice of America (VOA).
The country has a decades-long history of massive and brutal human rights abuses. Over the past several months, the Cambodian government has increased repression, including blocking the country’s main opposition party from participating in July’s national elections.

In March, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen awarded around $1 million to local brand-licensing and wholesaling conglomerate HSC Group for government facial recognition projects.

Led by tycoon Oknha Sok Hong, HSC’s business empire spans retailing, food and beverage, construction equipment and other sectors. But the company is also known for the work it has done on identity and surveillance systems used by the Ministry of Interior. This includes a CCTV network in Phnom Penh, the nation’s cosmopolitan capitol.

Called the City Security System, there are similar projects for border control, passports and ID card programs. Phnom Penh’s camera system includes software for tracking crimes and monitoring movement in public places and private companies, according to the company.
Government skeptics are warning that the decision by officials to give biometrics projects to HSC, which already has access to a trove of identity information, could make surveillance easier. Neither HSC nor the government reportedly have answered VOA questions about the system, citing national security concerns. Cambodia is already dealing with questions about the wisdom of participating in China’s continent-spanning Belt and Road infrastructure-building program. According to reporting by The Straits Times, portions of the growing surveillance system in Cambodia are sourced from China.

Like most nations, even in the developed North, Cambodia lacks comprehensive data privacy policies. The clarity legislators seem ready to enact could strengthen government control. They are considering a controversial cybersecurity law that critics say could censor political opposition and consolidate control of local internet access. The country began moving towards digital identity documents last year.