

NGOs Call On the Government to Restore Human Rights in Cambodia



Chhim Sithar leaves the Phnom Penh municipal court after her verdict on May 25, 2023.
(CamboJA/Pring Samrang)

Amid a visit by the Special Rapporteur to Cambodia, non-governmental organizations have asked the government to improve human rights conditions in the country, where freedom of expression and political rights continue to be undermined, along with the abuse of political opponents and the shutting down of independent media.

Ahead of the 75th Human Rights Day celebration on December 10, the Cambodian Institute for Democracy held a human rights

forum themed “Challenges and Ways Forward” to engage relevant stakeholders in a free and open dialogue.

In conjunction with the anniversary, Special Rapporteur Vitit Muntarbhorn is visiting Cambodia from December 4 to 8 to check on the progress of the government’s efforts to restore human rights. He is expected to meet with government officials, NGOs, and the media.

“The human rights situation [in Cambodia] is up and down. Currently, I can say that there is a huge decline,” said Chak Sopheap, executive director at Cambodia Center for Human Rights (CCHR), during a forum in Phnom Penh on Monday.

“We have seen problems like land disputes, and the restriction of political rights and citizens’ right to freedom of expression and peaceful gathering,” she said.

Sopheap cited an incident of land right activists in Koh Kong province being prevented from handing over a petition in Phnom Penh and instead [convicted](#) for incitement, as well as the imprisonment of American lawyer Seng Theary and union leader [Chhim Sithar](#) for exercising their freedom of expression.

French ambassador Jacques Pellet also expressed concern that human rights in Cambodia had not improved, particularly with the exclusion of the main opposition party, which was [disqualified](#) in the July election.

“We are concerned when we speak about human rights defenders, journalism, and environmental activists. I think the situation is not really improving,” Pellet said at the forum.

Responding to the concern by NGOs, Sreng Chenda, a member of Cambodia Human Rights Committee, which is made up of government officers and NGOs, said Cambodia’s human rights

situation has become “increasingly better”, including the existence of democratic multi parties.

“I agree that freedom of expression and press freedom are guaranteed under Article 41 of the Cambodian constitution but the article also states that the exercise of these rights should not infringe the rights of others,” he said.

“National security and public order must be respected. Our freedom of expression results in the violation of other people’s rights. At this point, authorities will take legal action,” Chenda said.

On November 23, CCHR’s [annual report](#) stressed that freedom of information and expression, and press freedom continued to be undermined in Cambodia.

“The country continues its worrying trend of over-policing free speech and silencing critical voices, a repression that was exacerbated ahead of the July 2023 general election,” the report said. “Intimidation, surveillance, threats, or judicial harassment are also used on a regular basis to target those who dare to speak up.”

Cambodian Institute for Democracy director Pa Chanroeun echoed this by calling on the government to restore fundamental rights and stop the restriction and persecution of human rights activists and citizens who seek justice.

“This situation is damning and calls for more attention for the restoration of human rights by the state authorities. I have seen a decline in human rights in Cambodia, in relation to democracy due to confrontations between the ruling party and opposition party,” Chanroeun.

Sok Eysan, ruling CPP spokesperson, could not be reached for comment.