

Restrictions and Violations Against Fundamental Freedoms Up 11 Percent in 2023

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Former NagaWorld workers organize a campaign during the Paris Peace Agreement in Phnom Penh, October 22, 2023. (CamboJA/Uon Chhin)

Restrictions and violations of fundamental rights and freedoms in Cambodia have risen by 11 percent in 2023 from [2022](#), the [annual publication](#) of the Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project stated.

Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project (FFMP), is a joint project between the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) and the Solidarity Center.

According to the report, 633 incidents related to fundamental freedoms were recorded in 2023. Out of these, 255 incidents had at least one restriction, and 377 involved abuse.

As for the report in 2023, 98 incidents of systematic expression were recorded, with 64% of these violations of freedom of expression on social media. Social media Facebook has the most restrictions or abuses.

Some 85 people were charged with criminal offenses for violating freedom of expression, with 73% of them charged with cyberbullying. These sanctions led to a decrease in online criticism in Cambodia.

NGO rights group Adhoc president Ny Sokha told CamboJA that Cambodia values free democracy, but there has been a decline in fundamental freedoms. “Human rights violations and restrictions on expression are concerning.”

Sokha said the UN Commission on Human Rights will put pressure on the government to restore freedom. If the government does not fix it, there will be consequences.

“Indeed, civil society wants to see the government address this political stalemate primarily to uphold fundamental freedoms and promote human rights. It is possible to solve the problem of human rights abuses because we have the experience,” he said.

He added that the restrictive political situation in Cambodia meant that human rights violations continue to happen, which has led to the development of international support.

NGO rights group Licadho operations director Am Sam Ath said there has been a decline in some cases, but if one were to look at the fundamental freedoms, the violation in 2023 compared to 2022 until 2018, has not changed too much.

The right to freedom of expression is subject to many violations in the report, he told CamboJA News, adding that the recent amendment to the election law might affect people’s right to vote, which can ultimately impact election results.

“It’s a good law, but the law must include input from all stakeholders. It should also be applied to its full effect,” he said.



Government spokesperson Pen Bona told CamboJA News that the law should be respected by all stakeholders. He denied that legislations were enacted in relation to any non-political entity, adding that the legislations are not unconstitutional.

He said Cambodians need not worry about freedom of expression, as they have “enough freedom of expression”. People who are concerned about freedom of expression are the “perpetrators, those who violate these rights”.

Bona said Cambodia is a small country with a population of 17 million, but it has 6,000 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Interior, and more than 6,000 unions registered with the Ministry of Labor.

“So, in total there are tens of thousands of NGOs and unions. Which other country has created a bigger association of freedom of association than Cambodia?” Bona asked.

He said civil society organizations should take this into consideration before writing the report. “Ask civil society organizations to count how many countries have more unions than Cambodia?” he added.

Political analyst Em Sovannara said Adhoc’s report reflects the situation in Cambodia. To date, there has been no positive response from the National Election Commission or the tax authorities highlighted in the report. It is a matter of concern for Cambodians who want a democratic environment with human rights and freedom of expression protected.

“The important task of civil society organizations is that all local people will not be able to influence the government to respond. Cambodia, the signatories of the Paris Agreements, are national symbols.

“Paris Agreement [signatories] will have to push so that the government or the ruling party will respond to civil society’s demands,” he told CamboJA News.

Nhil Sophanith, a youth social researcher, told CamboJa that there was a decline in fundamental freedoms, and the government needs to take comprehensive measures to protect these freedoms. The government should focus on raising awareness and educating the people.

He said the government does not pay attention to the needs and rights of the people in some cases. “The restrictions on expression seem to be even more severe when we look at the coverage by independent media.”

The expression of common interests and opinions is as difficult as expressing one’s personal views. The people are weakened by threats and accusations, which results in limited freedom of expression.

“In the future, as a young person, I want to see a society where [the space for] expression is broad, provides [big] opportunities, and motivates Cambodian people because when there is space and freedom of expression there will be development in all areas,” Sophanith said.

In addition, he wants to see the government develop the space for freedom of expression which is enshrined in the Constitution. The law does not construe freedom of expression as a provocation or accusation.

Today, if the expression is inappropriate, the government must correct the third provision. “If the expression is restricted to the company or enterprise, the government must deal with the protection,” he said.

Meanwhile, the 2023 report highlights instances of harassment and intimidation experienced by journalists during reporting. In five cases, legal threats were issued on journalists, and the publication of articles were blocked. There were six cases of attacks on journalists reported, and in four cases, their materials were seized.

In none of these cases have action been taken on the offenders. The excessive interference with journalists’ activities is concerning, the report said. The government also restricted press freedom by shutting down five media outlets which reported on corruption before the 2023 national elections. Appeals against this decision are pending.



Phnom Penh security guards prevent a cameraman from filming a NagaWorld protest on February 24, 2022. Licadho

Ministry of Information spokesperson Tep Asnarith said actors in the information sector play an important role in contributing to its growth. Attention paid by NGOs and institutions in Cambodia on the activities of journalists is crucial to promoting the professional values of journalism.

He said that activity reports provide a record of incidents that can be investigated thoroughly with factual and legal input for effective solutions. Therefore, professional cooperation and sincerity are necessary for accurate information and acceptable inputs.

Journalists and media units in Cambodia have fulfilled their roles and responsibilities in 2023, covering events and reporting freely and professionally. The ministry and the rest of the government are committed to protecting the right to freedom of expression and press, promoting media and journalists as partners for development.

“We encourage organizations or associations to cooperate in providing information about the situation including prepared reports for the ministries, local authorities, and other stakeholders. There has to be integrity, honesty and transparency,” he said.

Soeun Srey Soth, representing Samrong Tbong community in Sangkat Samrong, Khan Prek Pnov, told CamboJA News she was a victim of land encroachment on Boeung Ta Mok and is currently facing a court case. She feels frustrated and powerless as the government has not been able to provide any solution.

In 2023, there were 134 incidents relating to freedom of assembly. Some 74% were restrictions on peaceful assembly, and 25% related to violations or abuses. The most frequent cases involved labor rights meetings, land rights meetings and meetings of opposition politicians.

In 2023, criminal sanctions were applied on people who exercised their freedom to assembly. Some 19 individuals were summoned and 10 were convicted for conducting peaceful meetings as community representatives or members.

Srey Soth said land disputes have been filed in court since 2021. The process has been slow, challenging and costly. The trial was closed in June 2023, but the investigation is still ongoing, and the case has not yet been resolved.

“As a community representative, I would like to request that a fair solution be found for the people, instead of threatening or harming us. Two or three plaintiffs want the lawsuits dropped and want the land we live on to be developed for us,” she said.