NGOs: Cambodians’ knowledge of basic rights on the decline

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A public opinion poll conducted by three NGOs over the past years has found a decrease in the number of people who understand their fundamental freedoms and rights.

The Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR), Solidarity Centre and Adhoc conducted a poll early this year about public perception on fundamental rights and compared the findings to the three previous years.

The poll found the level of understanding of fundamental rights dropped dramatically.

According to the polling from 2016 to 2020, only a small number of people believe they have an understanding of their fundamental freedoms and rights. Few people said they have the right to participate in association. Most said their freedom to join any political activity was limited, according to the poll result.

Only a small number of respondents said they have the right to peaceful assembly and protest. Most did not think they have a right to speak freely in a public place or feel safe expressing opinions online, the results showed.
CCHR executive director Chak Sopheap said on Tuesday the public perceptions factsheet highlighted some of the key trends from the annual public poll conducted by the Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project.

She said the objective of the poll is to assess the extent to which individuals in Cambodia understand their rights to freedom of association, expression and assembly, and the extent to which they feel free to exercise these rights.

“The results of the poll assist us to reflect more broadly on the human rights situation in Cambodia, and how to improve human rights protections.

“One of the most concerning findings is the steadily decreasing number of individuals who report that they understand the fundamental freedoms of expression, association and assembly. This year recorded the lowest level of self-reported understanding to date for each of the freedoms, with freedom of association the least understood.

“There is an acute need to improve public understanding of rights and fundamental freedoms as enshrined in domestic and international law to enable citizens to actively engage in society and to empower them to hold the government accountable for its failure to uphold freedoms,” she said.

Sopheap added that the decreasing levels of understanding must be reversed to prevent the further corrosion of civic space, and ultimately democracy, in Cambodia. The results of the public poll are causes for concern as a lack of understanding of fundamental freedoms and human rights among the population allows the government to get away with flouting them.

Ministry of Justice spokesman Chin Malin said on Tuesday he could not assess the level of credibility of the poll. The results of the poll depend on the methodology, questions asked and respondent groups, he said.

“If they selected a specific group which has a tendency to go against the government, those people would respond that freedom to assembly and expression has decreased.

“But if they select another group that support legal enforcement measures of the government taken to ensure public order, then the result would be different,” he said.

He said ministry has not made a scientific assessment on the level of public understanding on the matter.

Details: https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/ngos-cambodians-knowledge-basic-rights-decline