Has Cambodia’s efforts to fight corruption paid off ten years on?

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On January 30, the Anti-Corruption Unit closed the procedure for the month-long asset declaration required from Cambodian officials every two years, while Cambodia scored a 21 out of 100 on Transparency International’s (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for 2020, a one point improvement over the score the year before. A Khmer Times journalist looks back on how the Anti-Corruption Law has played its role in fighting corruption in Cambodia ten years later.

Phay Siphan, spokesman for the Council of Ministers, said the Cambodian government and the Anti-Corruption Unit had done a tremendous job in stamping out corruption in Cambodia since the adoption of the Anti-Corruption Law in 2011.

He disagreed with the latest CPI report by TI despite the one-point increase in Cambodia’s ranking for 2020.

“I don’t know how this organisation has done [the report]?” he questioned. “What I am interested in is when they scored North Korea.”

“Who went to North Korea? he added, asking how TI could score the country if it did not even go.

Siphan said TI’s corruption report did not reflect the actual situation in Cambodia.
“Let me ask you back,” he said. “If the Royal Government [of Cambodia] is so corrupt, how has it been able to save money and buy gold reserves?”

He also rejected TI’s negative portrayal of the justice system in Cambodia. He said Prime Minister Hun Sen and Interior Minister Sar Kheng had stressed that justice was important to ensure that a country had peace and stability.

“So, we are now making justice reform,” he said.

The spokesman said there were agents from the Anti-Corruption Unit present at all hearings at the courts in Cambodia to ensure that the procedures were properly followed.

“Second, there is monitoring of the ruling whether it follows the law and procedures,” he said.

Likewise, the spokesman said people throughout Cambodia had the right to media freedom and freedom of information unlike how it was reported by TI.

“All Cambodian people have the right to send information to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister,” he said, adding that the government had also found solutions for the people’s concerns.

Meanwhile, Siphan said the increase in the number of foreign investments had also indicated the improvement of the rule of law and the decrease of corruption in Cambodia.

“This is the trust of foreign investors,” he said.

Kin Phea, director general of the International Relations Institute of Cambodia at the Royal Academy of Cambodia, echoed Siphan’s assertion of the government’s determination in combating corruption.

“Overall, after we have the anti-corruption law and the Anti-Corruption Unit, we have noticed that officials seemed to be reluctant to commit corruption,” he said. “People in general also have more awareness of corruption and what corruption is.”

He said Cambodian officials had changed their attitude concerning corruption as they were more afraid of being charged with any corruption-related offences.

“Perception of corruption has been better and people are more afraid of committing corruption than before,” Phea said. “Before we had the [anti-corruption law], there were some officials who had openly committed corruption. They might straightforwardly talk about under the table services. But, there are no such cases now.”

However, Phea said he believed corruption had not been totally eliminated in Cambodia despite the existence of the Anti-Corruption Law and the government’s will to stamp it out.

“In whatever country, there is still corruption going on,” he said. “It can still happen secretly and in more technical ways that we can’t estimate.”

Phea said the asset declaration required by the Anti-Corruption Unit was key in reminding officials to avoid committing corruption.
“It is an important tool to prevent corruption, because it is evidence showing the accumulation of wealth by an official,” he explained, adding that the sealed envelope of asset declaration could be opened and verified if an official was suspected of having committed corruption.

Nevertheless, a political analyst and a human rights activist have portrayed a different picture of corruption in Cambodia.

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), said corruption has been – and continues to be – a major issue in Cambodia, as evidenced by Cambodia’s ranking in TI’s CPI.

“Corruption is unfortunately rampant across Cambodia, permeating the judiciary, land administration, public services and the police, just to name a few,” she said, “And taking the form of bribery, political favouritism, nepotism and exploitation for personal gains.”

Sopheap said the abuse of power by those in charge hampers the proper functioning of institutions as well as diminishing accountability, weakening political integrity and eroding public trust in the government.

“While there seems to be political will to stamp out corruption in Cambodia, more needs to be done to put an end to this practise,” she said, adding that the government needed to punish those who perpetrate it.

Ear Sophal, associate professor at Occidental College in the United States and author of Aid Dependence in Cambodia, also shared a similar pessimistic view, especially when it comes to asset declaration.

“Asset declaration is about revealing what you own,” he said. “If you own assets that are not concordant with your income, then how did you obtain these assets?”

Regarding asset declaration, Sophal said he did not believe that all officials gave honest answers as the answers are kept in an unopened envelope.

“Elsewhere that information is public and open to scrutiny,” he said. “Only in Cambodia was it done this way, the better way to protect the officials.”

Sophal also dismissed that fact that corruption in Cambodia had decreased since the adoption of the Anti-Corruption Law ten years ago. He said Cambodia would have saved a huge amount of money from corruption if the law had been strictly and efficiently applied.

“Billions of dollars for sure,” he said, adding that corruption money could clearly be seen in the wealth accumulated by Cambodian officials after they took office.

Meanwhile, ordinary Cambodians have showed both positive and negative views on the government’s efforts in fighting corruption in Cambodia.

Eang Nam, a community fishery activist, said he had noticed that corruption had been rampant in the fishery sector in Cambodia.

“We have the good Fishery Law and the good will of top officials at the national level,” he said. “But, there is systematic corruption at the sub-national level.”
He said there seemed to be informants of the imminent crackdowns each time fishery officers and community fishing activists went to confiscate illegal fishing nets.

“They know in advance that we are coming,” Nam said. “So, someone who has received money from illegal fishermen must have notified them.”

But, things are not too bleak in all aspects in the Cambodian society.

Chamroeun Nira, a 25-year-old mother who has just delivered a baby, said corruption seemed to have been stamped out in the maternity ward at the hospital she went to in Kandal province.

“The midwives and nurses took good care of me and my baby,” she said. “They didn’t ask for any money like before.”

However, Nira said she still heard people talking about some hospitals refusing to treat patients who did not have money.

Ann Sovan, a 63-year-old university librarian, said the quality of education seemed to have reached its peak in 2014 when he took his high school exam at the age of 56 thanks to the decrease in the level of corruption in Cambodia.

“I would not have passed the exam if there was corruption,” he said.

However, he said teachers and education officials seemed to have slowly learned how to bypass the rules and corruption law.

“There may be some instances of corruption in the education sector,” he said. “But, I hope things will turn for the better for Cambodia in the future.”

Details: https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50809044/has-cambodias-efforts-to-fight-corruption-paid-off-ten-years-on/