Fear Among Journalists Hindering Freedom: Analysts

Sok Khemara, VOA Khmer | Washington, DC

President George W. Bush takes a question from the audience at Freedom House, Wednesday, March 29, 2006 in Washington, DC.

Photo: Courtesy of Freedom House

As Washington prepares for a series of events to mark World Press Freedom Day next month, Cambodian journalists and media analysts say heavy restrictions on media remain.

The US will host the Unesco-supported event from May 1 to May 3, in a number of functions that focus on 21st Century media and its challenges, especially in social media.

Cambodia, meanwhile, continues to struggle
with traditional media rights.

Cambodia’s law provides for a free press, among other constitutional freedoms, but journalists here contend with threats, criminalized lawsuits, bans and self-censorship, analysts said.

“When journalists commit self-censorship, by not daring to publish information that is strongly critical of the government, or information that is negative about society, then this causes the democratic process to not only stand in place, but to go backward,” Moeun Chhean Narridh, director of the Cambodian Institute for Media Studies, said.

Twelve journalists were killed in Cambodia between 1995 and 2008, but no perpetrators have been arrested in any of those cases. Other journalists have been jailed under criminal defamation or disinformation laws, especially those affiliated with the opposition.

Boy Roeuy, publisher of the Khmer Nation paper, which is sympathetic to the opposition Sam Rainsy Party, said fear among journalists is at an all-time high.

“There’s a strong surge [in fear] when we see corrupt officials,” he said. “Before, we could write about it, but now if we write they use methods of
threaten us, directly or indirectly, through those
that know us. This causes us to pay attention, to
be afraid, and is, especially, frustrating us from
writing the story, literally.”

It is also getting harder to seek balancing
comments from government officials, he said,
opening up more lawsuits. All of this adds up to
a weakened opposition press, which has a vital
role, he said.

“Without the opposition, they freely mistreat our
citizens,” he said.

Meanwhile, even supporters of the ruling
Cambodian People’s Party have been poorly
treated, he said, citing the example of Boeung
Kak lake, whose residents have protested an
impending real estate development that will push
them from their homes.

“Look, in the Boeung Kak land conflict, most of
the victims are holding photos of [Prime
Minister] Hun Sen and Mrs. Bun Rany, and
wearing CPP shirts, CPP caps,” he said. “We’ve
never at all seen them wearing the [SRP logo]
candle light shirts, candle light caps, to protest
for justice.”

However, Oam Chandara, publisher of the
ruling-party aligned Meatophoum News and
head of the Khmer Journalist Friendship
Association, said press freedom in 2011 was better in Cambodia than in neighboring countries.

Media is more cautious nowadays, he said, because laws are stricter and codes of conduct stronger.

“When we commit something wrong, violate the law, we have to take responsibility,” he said. “So we have to be cautious, in particular we have to respect professionalism, have a proper source, then we don’t have any problems, based on my observations.”

Critics of the new penal code say defamation and disinformation should be civil suits, not criminal, and should not carry jail penalties. Such charges have been used in recent years to try and jail journalists who have written unflatteringly of public officials or powerful business interests.

Phay Siphan, a government spokesman, also said the laws have improved. It is prohibited by law to discredit someone’s reputation, he said.

“I don’t see anything that journalists are oppressed in speaking on,” he said. “The press have adequate freedom in speaking, in criticism…. No one prevents them from criticizing anybody. Especially now that we have
the Anti-Corruption Unit, they also have an open window for complaints, or to receive any secretive information that is related to the individual who committed the wrongdoing.”

However, as Moeun Chhean Narridh points out, there is no law for freedom of information in Cambodia. Such a law would improve professional journalism and would help defend journalists from lawsuits, he said.

“We only depend on sources,” he said. “Most sources are anonymous. So for an investigative article, a very critical article, or controversial news, an anonymous source is easily counter-attacked and makes it easy to bring a lawsuit.”

Ou Virak, director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, said criminal defamation and disinformation laws continue to suppress the media.

“Our society is still a fearful society,” he said. “People remain in fear, and journalists in particular can be threatened and are working in fear. The fear makes it so journalists cannot properly fulfill their duties consistent with professionalism. This is a key topic for 2011.”

Both he and Moeun Chhean Narridh said they considered it a positive development that no journalist has been killed since 2008, while
citing progress in the growth of radio stations
and information available on the Internet.

Still, some websites critical of the government
were blocked recently, reportedly at the
suggestion of the Ministry of Posts and
Telecommunications, though officials there deny
they enforced a ban.

In the end, the US watchdog Freedom House
ranked Cambodia “not free” for 2010, for
persecution of and restrictions on journalists.

Government officials said the report was
exaggerated.

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