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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2022 - Cambodia

Not Free

24

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 5 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 19 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

24 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Cambodia's political system has been dominated by Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) for more than three decades. While the country conducted semicompetitive elections in the past, the 2018 elections were held in a severely repressive environment. Since then, Hun Sen's government has maintained pressure on opposition party members, independent press outlets, and demonstrators with intimidation, politically motivated prosecutions, and violence.

Key Developments in 2021

- Khieu Samphan, the former head of state of the Khmer Rouge, appeared before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) in August to appeal his 2018 conviction for genocide. In December, the tribunal dropped charges against Meas Muth, a lower-level official in the Khmer Rouge, citing insufficient evidence and the “absence of a definitive and enforceable indictment.”
- Prime Minister Hun Sen's government continued to subject members of the opposition—including political figures and a broad range of human rights activists—to harassment, intimidation, and arrests throughout the year.
- Restrictive legislation introduced in March allows the government to “ban or restrict any gathering or demonstration” in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. International human rights groups have condemned the law, saying it places undue restrictions on Cambodians' fundamental rights, including the freedom of movement and the right to peaceful assembly.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

King Norodom Sihamoni is chief of state, but has little political power. The prime minister is head of government, and is appointed by the monarch from among the majority coalition or party in parliament following legislative elections. Hun Sen first became prime minister in 1985. He was nominated most recently after 2018 National Assembly polls, which offered voters no meaningful choice. Most international observation groups were not present due to the highly restrictive nature of the contest.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The bicameral parliament consists of the 62-seat Senate and the 125-seat National Assembly. Members of parliament and local councilors indirectly elect 58 senators, and the king and National Assembly each appoint 2. Senators serve six-year terms, while National Assembly members are directly elected to five-year terms.

In 2018, the CPP won every seat in both chambers in elections that were considered neither free nor fair by established international observers, and prompted condemnation from many democracies. In the lead-up to the vote, the Supreme Court banned the main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP); many of its members were jailed, and numerous media outlets were closed. Several small, obscure new “opposition parties” ran candidates in the lower-house elections, though many of these were believed to have been manufactured by government allies to suggest multiparty competition.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant 1 / election management bodies? 4

In 2015, Cambodia passed two new election laws that permit security forces to take part in campaigns, punish parties that boycott parliament, and mandate a shorter campaign period of 21 days. The laws have been broadly enforced.

Voting is tied to a citizen’s permanent-resident status in a village, township, or urban district, and this status cannot be changed easily.

The CPP has complete control over the nine seats of the National Election Committee (NEC). In 2018, the NEC sought to aid the CPP’s campaign by threatening to prosecute any figures that urged an election boycott, and informing voters that criticism of the CPP was prohibited.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political 0 / groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these 4 competing parties or groupings?

Following the 2018 elections, Cambodia is a de facto one-party state. The main opposition CNRP was banned and its leaders have been charged with crimes, while other prominent party figures have fled the country. Although several small opposition parties contested the 2018 lower-house elections, none won seats. All the smaller parties were permitted to run by the CPP-controlled NEC, and both domestic and international observers questioned their authenticity. In late 2021, prominent opposition leader Sam Rainsy’s popular Candlelight Party—which had merged with Kem Sokha’s Human Rights Party to form the CNRP in 2012—resumed independent operations. The party quickly gained wide support among opposition groups and CNRP supporters.

Members of the political opposition, including CNRP members and supporters and a broad range of other political activists, were subject to harassment and arrests throughout 2021.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through 0 / elections? 4

The political opposition has been quashed through an ongoing government campaign of harassment, arrests, and convictions of opposition figures, supporters, and perceived supporters, carried out alongside severe restrictions on press freedom, free assembly, and civil society. The high rate of spoiled ballots in the 2018 lower house election—8.6 percent of all votes, according to the NEC—suggested strong popular discontent with the lack of choice, especially given that Hun Sen had repeatedly warned Cambodians not to spoil ballots.

Since the CNRP was banned in 2017, divisions within the party’s membership and among prominent opposition leaders have increased, which some fear has damaged the opposition’s ability to effectively challenge the ruling CPP.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political 1 / sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 4

The ruling party is not democratically accountable, and top leaders, especially Hun Sen, use the police and armed forces as instruments of repression. The military has stood firmly behind Hun Sen and his crackdown on the opposition. Hun Sen has built a personal bodyguard unit in the armed forces that he reportedly uses to harass and abuse CPP opponents.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

Ethnic minorities, especially those of Vietnamese descent, are regularly excluded from the political process and scapegoated by both the CPP and the opposition. Women make up 15 percent of the National Assembly, but their interests, like those of most citizens, are poorly represented.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies 0 / of the government? 4

Hun Sen has increasingly centralized power, and figures outside of his close circle have little impact on policymaking. Analysts also believe the prime minister is grooming his son, General Hun Manet, to succeed him. Hun Manet has been named to several key posts during his father’s rule, including that of deputy commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF). In December 2021, Hun Sen publicly stated that he wished to see Hun Manet succeed him as prime minister, though noted “it must be voted on.” Later that month, the CPP’s central committee unanimously voted to endorse Hun Manet as “future prime minister.”

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1 / 4

Anticorruption laws are poorly enforced, and corruption is pervasive in public procurement and tax administration, to the benefit of Prime Minister Hun Sen and his family. In 2018, Global Witness, an anticorruption nongovernmental organization (NGO), claimed that the prime minister’s family benefited from ownership stakes in firms worth over \$200 million; these companies were involved in projects varying from gold mining to the construction of Phnom Penh’s international airport.

Members of the prime minister’s family have also used their positions to keep millions of dollars in assets abroad, and have acquired Cypriot passports through its Citizenship by Investment program; participants must invest at least €2 million (\$2.4 million) to qualify.

Senior CPP senators have been implicated in acts of corruption, allegedly benefiting from smuggling operations and illegal land concessions.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

Nepotism and patronage undermine the functioning of a transparent bureaucratic system. A draft access to information law was finalized in 2019, but the government added the bill to its long-term strategic plan, delaying its implementation to 2023. International information rights groups have criticized the bill, warning it does not meet international standards.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4

The government uses lawsuits, criminal prosecutions, massive tax bills, and occasionally violent attacks to harass and intimidate the media. There are private print and broadcast outlets, but many are owned and operated by the CPP.

Since 2017, the government has engaged in an intense crackdown on independent media. The independent English-language newspaper *Cambodia Daily* closed that year after it was issued an onerous tax bill. It has since been relaunched as an online news aggregator. In 2018, the *Phnom Penh Post*, an independent newspaper, was sold to a Malaysian investor with links to Hun Sen, and many of its editors and reporters quit or were fired.

Chinese investments also influence Cambodian press output. Fresh News, a progovernment news site, has distributed content from Chinese state media since accepting outside investment in 2018.

While progovernment media organizations operate freely, foreign media groups operate with more severe restrictions and in some instances are forced out of the country altogether. In 2021, the state announced the creation of a new 15-member Monitoring Committee for Journalism Ethics, which is mostly composed of government officials. The committee is charged with monitoring and evaluating the “ethical conduct” of journalists and media outlets, and will report to the Information Ministry. Journalists and media rights NGOs have expressed concern that the committee will allow the government to more heavily restrict independent media coverage and further harass journalists.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 4

The majority of Cambodians are Theravada Buddhists and can practice their faith freely, but societal discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities persists. The government has increasingly used Facebook to spread disinformation about or smear activist monks.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 2 / 4

Teachers and students practice self-censorship regarding discussions about Cambodian politics and history. Criticism of the prime minister and his family is often punished.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of 1 / surveillance or retribution? 4

Open criticism of the prime minister and government by private citizens can result in reprisals, notably during the

run-up to elections.

Free expression has been increasingly restricted in recent years. In 2020, the government enacted legislation that gave Hun Sen the power to declare a state of emergency that would grant authorities vast powers to conduct digital surveillance, ban assemblies, and ban or limit broadcasting, among other provisions that amounted to virtually unchecked powers. While a state of emergency was never declared, Hun Sen issued numerous threats as the global pandemic became apparent, and a number of people, including private citizens and those considered political opponents, were indeed arrested throughout year on the pretext of spreading false information about COVID-19 or purportedly contravening government narratives about public health. In 2021, dozens of people were arrested for criticizing the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

Authorities are openly hostile to free assembly. Gatherings by the CNRP, the now-banned major opposition party, are prohibited. Demonstrations are routinely dispersed by security forces, who frequently subject peaceful protesters to threats, excessive violence, and arbitrary detention. Several protests in 2021 featured violent clashes between police forces and protesters.

The introduction of a law on "Preventive Measures Against the Spread of COVID-19" and other contagious diseases in March allows the government to "ban or restrict any gathering or demonstration" in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Those who violate the law could be subject to lengthy prison sentences and fines of up to 20 million riels (5,000 dollars).

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 1 / 4

Activists and civil society groups dedicated to justice and human rights risk violence and typically face state harassment and arrest, as do activists involved in land disputes.

A 2020 report issued by the UN Human Rights Office in Cambodia found that human rights activists and NGOs are often subjected to undue "interference, intimidation, or harassment" by Cambodian authorities.

Several prominent activists were arrested in 2021, including several members of environmental advocacy group Mother Nature. Many of those arrested faced prolonged periods of detention or prosecution on vague charges; numerous international human rights organizations have called the charges "absurd," and called on the Cambodian government to permit peaceful activism.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

Cambodia has a small number of independent trade unions, and workers have the right to strike, but many face retribution for doing so. A 2016 law on unions imposed restrictions on union activity, including excessive requirements for union formation.

In July 2020, authorities arrested union leader Rong Chhun on incitement charges. Chhun was found guilty in August 2021, and sentenced to two years in prison; Chhun was released early in November, after an appeals court reduced his sentence to time already served.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The judiciary is marred by corruption and a lack of independence. Judges have facilitated the government's ability to pursue charges against a broad range of opposition politicians.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Due process rights are poorly upheld in Cambodia. Abuse by law enforcement officers and judges remains extremely common. Sham trials are frequent, while elites generally enjoy impunity.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 1 / 4

Cambodians live in an environment of repression and fear. The torture of suspects and prisoners is frequent. The security forces are regularly accused of using excessive force against detained suspects.

The work of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), established to try the leaders of the former Khmer Rouge regime, has brought convictions for crimes against humanity, homicide, torture, and religious persecution. In 2018, the tribunal found Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, two surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge, guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity. They both received life sentences. The convictions marked the first

time the Khmer Rouge crimes were legally defined as genocide. Nuon Chea died in August 2019. Khieu Samphan appealed the ECCC’s verdict in August 2021, asking the court to overturn his conviction on charges of genocide; the ECCC had not ruled on the appeal by year’s end. In December, the tribunal dropped charges against Meas Muth, a lower-level official in the Khmer Rouge, citing insufficient evidence and the “absence of a definitive and enforceable indictment.”

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

Ethnic minorities, especially those of Vietnamese descent, often face legal and societal discrimination. The Cambodian government frequently refuses to grant refugee protections to Montagnards fleeing Vietnam, where they face persecution by the Vietnamese government. LGBT+ individuals have no legal protection against discrimination.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, 2 / employment, or education? 4

The constitution guarantees the rights to freedom of travel and movement, and the government generally respects these rights in practice. However, the emergency law adopted in 2020 would allow the government to heavily restrict these rights if invoked. In response to COVID-19 outbreaks in 2021, authorities placed some people who tested positive for the virus in quarantine centers; human rights groups have called these measures overly restrictive.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without 1 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4

Land and property rights are regularly abused for the sake of private development projects. Over the past several years, hundreds of thousands of people have been forcibly removed from their homes, with little or no compensation, to make room for commercial plantations, mine operations, factories, and high-end residential developments. Land disputes are common, and security forces typically respond to protests with force.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, 2 / protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4

The government does not frequently repress personal social freedoms, but women suffer widespread social discrimination. Rape and violence against women are common.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Equality of opportunity is severely limited in Cambodia, where a small elite controls most of the economy. Labor conditions can be harsh, sometimes sparking protests, and the government cracked down on labor protests in 2021. Exploitative working conditions and wage theft are common; in April, numerous garment workers reported that their legally guaranteed severance pay had been withheld.

Cambodia is a country of origin, destination, and transit point for sex and labor trafficking. In its 2021 *Trafficking in Persons* report, the US State Department noted that Cambodia does not meet the minimum standards for combating trafficking.

ecoi.net summary:

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