

Freedom in the World 2024



header1 Overview

Cambodia's political system has been dominated by the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and Hun Sen for more than three decades. While the country conducted semicompetitive elections in the past, polls are now held in a severely repressive environment. The CPP-led government has maintained pressure on the opposition, independent press outlets, and demonstrators with intimidation, politically motivated prosecutions, and violence. Hun Manet succeeded his father, Hun Sen, as prime minister in 2023, though the former premier still wields significant influence.

header2 Key Developments in 2023

- In February, the government revoked the license of Voice of Democracy (VoD), one of the country's last independent news outlets, after it reported on the activities of Hun Manet within the government.
- In an uncompetitive July election, the ruling CPP won almost all of the National Assembly's seats. The opposition Candlelight Party and the Khmer United Great Nation Party (KUGNP) were barred from participating, and the CPP spread online disinformation to bolster its own campaign.
- Hun Manet succeeded his father as prime minister in August. The new cabinet, which was appointed that month, included the children of outgoing ministers who served under Hun Sen.

PR Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

0.000
4.004

King Norodom Sihamoni is chief of state but has little political power. The prime minister is the head of government and is appointed by the monarch from among the majority coalition or party in parliament following legislative elections. Hun Sen, who first became prime minister in 1985, handed power to his son, Hun Manet, after the uncompetitive July 2023 elections. Hun Manet was officially named prime minister in August.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

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4.004

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. National Assembly members are directly elected to five-year terms in multiseat constituencies.

The July 2023 parliamentary elections were neither free nor fair. The CPP won 120 National Assembly seats, and the remaining 5 were won by the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Co-operative Cambodia (Funcinpec), a royalist party. In May the opposition Candlelight Party and the KUGNP were barred from participating. Besides the CPP, 17 other parties took part in elections, though many of these were believed to have been manufactured by government allies to suggest multiparty competition. The CPP additionally spread disinformation on Facebook to facilitate its campaign.

A3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

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4.004

Election laws permit security forces to take part in campaigns, punish parties that boycott the parliament, and mandate a 21-day campaign period. The laws have been broadly enforced. In June 2023, the National Assembly amended the electoral law effectively barring anyone boycotting the July elections from running for office; under the amendment, Cambodians must have voted in the two polls preceding their own candidacy.

While the opposition was represented on the National Election Committee (NEC) in the 2010s, since then the CPP placed more of its members into the NEC's seats and exerted more explicit control over the committee. In May 2023, the NEC barred the Candlelight Party and KUGNP from contesting the July elections, citing issues with their paperwork. The NEC seated in December included four Funcinpec members, but the chairman remained a CPP member.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because Cambodia's ruling party used the national electoral authority to bar the country's chief opposition group from contesting the July elections, and because the government altered election-related legislation to prohibit Cambodians who boycotted the July elections from running for office themselves.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?	0.000 4.004
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Cambodia is a de facto one-party state, with the government banning major opposition groups. Opposition leaders have faced criminal charges and convictions. The Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) was banned ahead of the 2018 elections, while the Candlelight Party was barred from contesting the July 2023 elections.

In March 2023, Cambodia National Heart Party cofounder Seam Pluk was convicted of forging registration documents along with 12 others. Also in March, CNRP official Kem Sokha was convicted of treason and received a 27-year home-imprisonment sentence. In July, exiled CNRP leader Sam Rainsy and exiled deputy leader Mu Sochua were banned from holding office for at least 10 years after they told voters to spoil ballots. In October, Rainsy, Sochua, and 10 other activists received prison terms for calling on Cambodians to stop repaying loans.

Authorities also impede registration efforts. In September 2023, 23 Candlelight Party members were arrested at a registration drive. Six were kept in custody; those six were released in December after apologizing and saying they would join the CPP.

B2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	0.000 4.004
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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.

B3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	1.001 4.004
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The ruling party is not democratically accountable, and top leaders use the police and armed forces as instruments of repression. The military stood firmly behind Hun Sen and similarly supports Hun Manet, who was once commander of the army.

The Chinese government, Cambodia's biggest patron, wields significant influence. In 2022, Chinese and Cambodian officials broke ground on a new facility on Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, near Sihanoukville. This facility is widely believed to be a base for Chinese naval activities. Chinese officials routinely meet with their Cambodian counterparts and pressure them to adhere to Beijing's wishes. In September 2023, Prime Minister Hun Manet visited Beijing and met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Cambodia also has become dependent on aid and investment from China. In 2020, the finance ministry in Phnom Penh reported that China held 44 percent of Cambodia's foreign debt.

B4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	1.001 4.004
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Ethnic minorities, especially those of Vietnamese descent, are regularly excluded from the political process and scapegoated by both the CPP and the opposition. Voting is tied to a citizen's

permanent-resident status in a village, township, or urban district, which cannot be easily changed.

C Functioning of Government

C1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	0.000 4.004
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Hun Sen centralized power during his time in office, and figures outside of his close circle had little impact on policymaking. Hun Sen openly expressed his intention to influence the government after leaving the premiership; in October 2023, he reportedly lobbied ministers to reject proposed tax increases that ultimately did not come to pass. Hun Sen also retains influence as CPP leader and Senate president. Hun Manet appeared to develop his own close circle as prime minister, and some of its members were sons of Hun Sen's key allies.

C2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	1.001 4.004
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Anticorruption laws are poorly enforced, and corruption is pervasive in public procurement and tax administration, to the benefit of the ruling family. Members of Hun Sen's family have allegedly used their positions to keep millions of dollars in assets abroad.

C3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	1.001 4.004
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Nepotism and patronage undermine the functioning of a transparent bureaucratic system. A draft access to information law was finalized in 2019, but the government did not pass it as of the end of 2023. International information-rights groups have criticized the bill, warning it does not meet international standards.

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	1.001 4.004
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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. 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.

Since 2017, the government has cracked down on independent media. In 2018, the *Phnom Penh Post*, an independent newspaper, was sold to a Malaysian investor with links to Hun Sen. The government stripped the licenses of three digital media outlets in 2022 after they published stories on government corruption. In February 2023, the government revoked the license of VoD, one of the country's last independent outlets, after it published a report on Hun Manet's activities within

the government. In September, the Agriculture Ministry threatened to close CamboJA News after it reported on a farmer who had been physically attacked near Phnom Penh; the farmer said he was attacked for his criticism of the government. CamboJA News then removed the agriculture minister's name from its report.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

3.003

4.004

The majority of Cambodians are Theravada Buddhists and can practice their faith freely, but societal discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities persists.

D3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

2.002

4.004

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

D4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

1.001

4.004

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. Under a 2020 law, the prime minister can declare a state of emergency that grants authorities effectively unchecked powers; authorities can conduct digital surveillance, ban assemblies, and ban or limit broadcasting under some of its provisions.

Hun Sen has proposed instituting a single internet gateway that would centralize internet traffic and increase the government's capacity for internet censorship and online surveillance. Hun Sen notably sparred with Meta after its Oversight Board recommended suspending his Facebook and Instagram accounts in June 2023 for allegedly encouraging violence. Hun Sen vowed to bar Meta employees from Cambodia, threatened to ban access to Facebook, and temporarily suspended his own account. In July, Hun Sen clarified that he would not ban access to the social platform. In late August, Meta declined the board's recommendation to suspend his account.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

1.001 4.004

Authorities are openly hostile to free assembly. Opposition gatherings are prohibited. Demonstrations related to politics, labor rights, land disputes, and anything else the government considers sensitive are routinely dispersed by security forces, who frequently subject peaceful protesters to threats, excessive violence, and arbitrary detention. Under a law introduced in 2021, the government can additionally ban or restrict assemblies to prevent the spread of diseases including COVID-19; offenders risk lengthy prison sentences and fines.

E2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

1.001
4.004

Activists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) 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 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Cambodia found that human rights activists and NGOs are often subjected to undue “interference, intimidation, or harassment” by Cambodian authorities.

E3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

1.001 4.004

Cambodia has a small number of independent trade unions, and workers have the right to strike, but many face retribution for doing so. Authorities continue to crack down on labor leaders and those who strike. In May 2023, Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld leader Chhim Sithar was found guilty of inciting to commit a felony, a charge that originated from the union’s 2021 strike against a casino operator. Sithar received a two-year sentence while another eight union members received shorter sentences.

F Rule of Law

F1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0.000 4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

1.001 4.004

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 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

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

1.001
4.004

Cambodians live in an environment of repression and fear. Suspects and prisoners are frequently tortured.

The work of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), established to try the leaders of the 1975–79 Khmer Rouge regime, has brought convictions for crimes against humanity, homicide, torture, and religious persecution against three former leaders. The ECCC, which Hun Sen never fully supported, concluded in late 2022.

F4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	1.001 4.004
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Ethnic minorities, especially those of Vietnamese descent, often face legal and societal discrimination. Large numbers of foreigners are held in Cambodia and forced to participate in criminal schemes.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	2.002 4.004
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The constitution guarantees the rights to freedom of travel and movement, and the government generally respects these rights in practice.

G2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	1.001 4.004
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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. In December 2023, Hun Manet said that a new city would be built in Run Ta Ek; several thousand people who had settled there were displaced because of land development.

G3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	2.002 4.004
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The government does not frequently repress personal social freedoms, but women suffer widespread social discrimination. Rape and violence against women are common.

G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	1.001 4.004
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Equality of opportunity is severely limited in Cambodia, where a small number of elites control most of the economy. Labor conditions can be harsh, sometimes sparking protests and crackdowns. Exploitative working conditions and wage theft are common.

Cambodia is a country of origin, destination, and transit for sex and labor trafficking. In the 2023 edition of its *Trafficking in Persons Report*, the US State Department reported that officials were complicit in human trafficking. The department reported that the government had created a working group to address trafficking but also noted that officials harassed and intimidated activists trying to address scamming operations.

Workers from Asian countries who have been promised formal work in Cambodia have been forced to work for the operators of scam networks. In an August 2023 report, the OHCHR said that 100,000 people in Cambodia were being forced to participate in such schemes.