

new Minister of Home Affairs granted citizenship to around 2 000 applicants, including stateless and non-Muslim individuals.

2. EU action - key focus areas: There is no structured dialogue on human rights with Brunei but human rights concerns are regularly raised by the local EU representation (France and Germany) and during the visits of the non-resident EU Head of Delegation. In March 2023, the EU Delegation commemorated International Women's Day by holding a policy seminar, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, on women's rights and gender equality in Bandar Seri Begawan.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Bilateral relations are limited given that the negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement remain on hold. The EU Delegation, located in Jakarta, continues to follow developments on the ground, in liaison with the two EU Member States who have in-country missions (France and Germany). In 2023, the EU-Brunei Partnership Facility was launched.

4. EU financial engagement: There is no direct funding from EU programmes to human rights projects in Brunei.

5. Multilateral context: Brunei has ratified a number of key human rights conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Even though in 2019 the Sultan had publicly committed to ratifying the Convention Against Torture (UNCAT), Brunei had not yet done so at the end of 2023. In 2023, Brunei ratified the ILO Forced Labour Convention. For the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Brunei submitted five 'Human Rights 75 Pledges.'

Kingdom of Cambodia

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The government continued to use of the judiciary to limit space for political opponents. On 3 March 2023 the leader of the dissolved Cambodian National Rescue Party, Kem Sokha, was sentenced to 27 years' imprisonment after a three-year trial, on charges related to his political activity. The mass trials of opposition politicians and activists continued, with the fundamentals of due process and right to defence not respected. The general election of 13 July 2023 was conducted in a restricted political and civic space. The opposition was excluded from the electoral process, due to criminal convictions of political leaders as well as the disqualification of the Candlelight Party, which was not allowed to register to take part in the vote on procedural grounds. Freedom of expression remained constrained with instances of authorities targeting social media users and activists criticising the government. Media freedom has been constrained, including through disproportionate use of provisions criminalising defamation and incitement. In February one of the last independent media outlets, Voice of Democracy (VOD), had its licence revoked after publishing an article about Hun Manet, son of the then prime minister. Cambodia ranked 147th out of 180 countries in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters without Borders, falling from 142nd position in 2022. As far as freedom of association is concerned, the restrictive Law on Associations and Non-Governmental

Organisations has not been amended and NGOs are subjected to cumbersome registration and reporting procedures. In 2023, the situation seems to have become more restrictive, and NGOs have reported increased surveillance and requests to disclose information on funding and activities. Instances of human trafficking and forced labour via online scams continued to be increasingly reported. Cambodia improved its position in the 2023 Global Gender Gap report; gender mainstreaming is increasingly addressed in key national policies and strategies. Gender-based violence continued to be a challenge. The Ministry of Women's Affairs launched a 16-day campaign to end violence against women, under the theme "UNITE! Invest to prevent violence against women and girls" aligned with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, observed 25 November until 10 December.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2020 the European Commission temporarily and partially withdrew the tariff preferences granted to Cambodia under the EU's "Everything But Arms" trade scheme due to serious and systematic violations of human rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This decision remained in place in 2023. Addressing the existing human rights and labour rights concerns is an essential requirement for the full reinstatement of the EBA preferences, as set out in the EEAS/Commission report on enhanced engagement with Cambodia published in November 2023. In line with the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-24, EU activities focused on the protection and empowerment of individuals, notably in the context of political and civil rights. The EU Delegation and EU Member States monitored a significant number of court hearings of human rights defenders, politicians and activists. They maintained continuous engagement with diverse civil society actors. The EU-Cambodia Joint Committee Sub-group on Institution Building, Administrative Reform, Legal and Judicial Reform, Governance and Human Rights was postponed to 2024.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: 2023 saw fewer high-level political contacts between Cambodia and the EU after the many meetings that took place in 2022, with visits to Phnom Penh linked to Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN, and to Brussels for the EU-ASEAN Commemorative Summit. Human rights and democracy related issues were also topics of bilateral contacts in the country, including with representatives of the new government of Prime Minister Hun Manet, and were included in the policy dialogues with high-level representatives of relevant authorities within EU cooperation programmes. The EU Delegation maintained contacts with a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including political parties, NGOs, CSOs, the business sector and trade unions. The EU published several statements throughout 2023 including: on the verdict against the opposition leader Kem Sokha, on the closing down of the independent news portal VOD, on the disqualification of the opposition Candlelight Party from the parliamentary elections, and on the conduct of the National Assembly elections themselves.

4. EU financial engagement: The EU continued to support human rights and democracy in Cambodia through its cooperation instruments by applying a rights-based approach and mainstreaming human rights through all priority areas of intervention. The EU managed ten grants addressing a broad range of human rights issues including freedom of expression, protection of land ownership, combatting gender-based violence and support to human rights defenders. The EU also continued to provide support to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to ensure that national and international actors in Cambodia can integrate more human rights information and analysis in development

responses, strengthen the rule of law and enhance implementation of outcomes from the international human rights mechanisms. In 2023, the EU also started seven new projects in support of labour rights and decent work, protection of land ownership and the traditional rights of forest and fishing communities, and in support of farmers' organisations and networks of CSOs.

5. Multilateral context: During 2023, the EU continued to underline its key concerns at the UN Human Rights Council including through EU statements and participation in the Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia. The Special Rapporteur, whose mandate was extended for another two years at the 54th Human Rights Council regular session, noted in his annual report the efforts by the Government of Cambodia to protect the life of people and maintain peace, stability, public order and improve the quality of life of the population. However, he also expressed serious concern about the reported deterioration of the civil and political environment due to the perceived chilling effects of judicial prosecutions, arrests, alleged surveillance, harassment and violence against members of political parties, trade unions and civil society.

People's Republic of China

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: in 2023, as corroborated through numerous reports by UN special rapporteurs, civil society organisations and academia, the human rights situation in China remained very serious. China's existing obligations under international and national laws (including its own Constitution) to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms for all were not respected. The application of the *non-refoulement principle* in China was [questioned by UN experts](#), further to the publication of reports about the forced, mass repatriation of escapees from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The government's crackdown continued on civil society organisations, including LGBTI activists, human rights defenders, journalists, academics and on Chinese citizens at large - including Uyghurs,²⁹ Tibetans³⁰, and persons belonging to ethnic, religious³¹ and linguistic minorities across China.

Regarding freedom of religion and belief, the Government only recognises five religion associations (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Protestant and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association) and closely monitors their houses of worship, clergy appointments and funding. New "*Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues*" came into force on 1 September with the declared goal of strengthening the regulation and management of religious venues³².

²⁹ The sentencing of renowned Uyghur professor Rahile Dawut to life in prison for "endangering state security by promoting separatism" received a lot of international attention and demonstrated the continuation of the repression of Uyghurs and the human rights crisis at large in Xinjiang .

³⁰ The European Parliament organised an urgency debate on the abduction of Tibetan children and forced assimilation practices through Chinese boarding schools in Tibet (13 December 2023).

³¹ In September 2023, the Chinese authorities took the unprecedented step of barring over a hundred thousand Tibetan Buddhist believers from attending the Kalachakra, a significant religious event, citing security concerns.

³² They are required to "support the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), support the socialist system and thoroughly implement Xi Jinping's new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics".