

The State of the World's Human Rights; Cambodia 2023

Background

The government crackdown on civil society organizations and political opposition that began in 2017 continued. National elections on 23 July were won by the ruling Cambodia People's Party after the disqualification of the only viable opposition party, the Candlelight Party. In August, the National Assembly endorsed Hun Manet as prime minister who replaced his father, Hun Sen.

Human trafficking

Despite a government crackdown, the human trafficking crisis continued. According to credible reports, migrant workers recruited by deceptive means and trafficked for forced labour continued to be held in fortified compounds where they were forced to work in cyber scams and online gambling operations run by criminal gangs. It was also reported that compounds that had previously been closed in the city of Sihanoukville had reopened, calling into question the effectiveness of the taskforce set up by the Ministry of Justice in 2022 to coordinate investigations and prosecutions of those responsible for human trafficking of migrant workers to Cambodia.

Trafficking victims had their passports confiscated and were forced to work under threat of violence in illegal operations which emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the year the authorities released more than 100 trafficked people from illegal compounds and transferred them to immigration detention centres. However, rescued survivors, some of whom had been subjected to rape and other physical violence, often spent months detained in overcrowded state-run detention centres, where they were required to pay for food and water and did not have access to legal counsel.¹

Forced evictions

The authorities continued a process started in 2022 of mass forced evictions of a reported 10,000 families from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Angkor, home to the Angkor Wat temple. Although many families had lived in the complex for several generations, the government claimed they were there illegally and were being relocated as part of a "voluntary relocation programme". However, there was a lack of genuine consultation and many of those evicted or who faced eviction were subjected to threats and intimidation. Evicted families, who left behind livelihoods as well as homes, did not receive adequate compensation, forcing many into debt. The government resettlement sites of Peak Sneng and Run Ta Ek lacked adequate housing, drinking water and sanitation.²

Hun Sen, the prime minister at the time, said the relocation programme was necessary to prevent Angkor from losing its World Heritage status. UNESCO had neither publicly condemned the government's actions nor set up an investigation into the allegations by year's end, despite being informed by Amnesty International in March and again in September that forced evictions were being justified in its name.³

Freedom of expression

In February, authorities revoked the licence of one of Cambodia's few remaining independent media outlets, Voice of Democracy (VOD). The closure was ostensibly for offending the then prime minister, Hun Sen, following a report about the authorization of financial aid to Türkiye by his son Hun Manet who was deputy commander-in-chief of the Cambodian army at the time. However, the closure followed the publication of a series of investigative reports by VOD about the human trafficking crisis and government officials' links to compounds where cyber-scamming was happening.⁴

Freedom of association

Misuse of the criminal justice system to target and harass members and supporters of opposition political parties continued. In March, Phnom Penh Municipal Court found the leader of the Cambodia National Rescue Party, Kem Sokha, guilty of a trumped-up charge of treason and sentenced him to 27 years in prison.⁵

In the weeks before the national election, and following public calls by Hun Sen for violence against political opponents, there were multiple physical attacks, including with metal batons, by unidentified assailants on members of the Candlelight Party. In May, the National Election Committee disqualified the party from contesting the elections on politically motivated grounds.⁶

A month ahead of the elections, on 23 June, the National Assembly unanimously voted to adopt amendments to the election law which were also widely viewed as preventing political opposition and intimidating the public. Under the amendments the National Election Committee can impose a fine of up to KHR 20 million (approximately USD 4,850) on anyone who encourages people not to register or vote.

Workers' rights

There was ongoing judicial harassment of members of the Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld (LRSU) and other labour activists, linked to their support for calls for higher wages and the reinstatement of dismissed workers following mass layoffs by the Hong Kong-registered NagaWorld Casino in the capital, Phnom Penh, in late 2021. On 25 May, a Phnom Penh court found nine current and former LRSU members guilty of incitement to commit a felony or disturb public security under Articles 494 and 495 of Cambodia's Criminal Code. LRSU president Chhim Sithar was sentenced to two years' imprisonment. The remaining eight received suspended prison sentences of between one year and 18 months.⁷

Indigenous Peoples' rights

In July, the National Assembly adopted a new code on environment and natural resources which, unlike previous land and environmental laws, replaced the term "Indigenous communities" with "local communities", leading to concerns that the new code undermines respect for and protection of Indigenous Peoples' rights.

Illegal logging continued and new mining operations took place in Prey Lang forest, home to Indigenous Kuy communities. Photographic evidence showed illegal loggers carrying home-made firearms, and Prey Lang Community Network members told Amnesty International about incidents, including at least one in early 2023, in which loggers shot at them as a form of intimidation. Concerns remained that proposed changes to the Law on Forestry, first floated in 2022, to allow hunting in protected forests would threaten wildlife and exacerbate tensions between Indigenous Peoples, environmental activists and loggers.
