

World Report 2024



Cambodia

Events of 2023

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet (left), stands next to his father, Hun Sen, former prime minister and current Senate president, during the country's 70th Independence Day, in Phnom Penh, November 9, 2023.

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Cambodia's self-characterization as a democratic government does not reflect the reality. Cambodia is effectively a single-party state with fixed and controlled elections, a lack of independent media, ruling party interference and control of all state institutions, political control of the judiciary, and systematic harassment and targeting of critics in the political opposition and civil society.

The situation deteriorated further in the run-up to the [national elections in July 2023](#). Then-Prime Minister Hun Sen intensified his [violent rhetoric, prompting a crackdown on political opposition, independent media, land rights activists, civil society leaders, and trade union leaders](#).

On May 15, the government-controlled National Election Committee (NEC) [barred the main opposition party](#), the Candlelight Party (CLP), from fielding candidates by rejecting the CLP's application documents on bogus, politically motivated grounds, ensuring that the elections were not a meaningful political process. Previously, the NEC had permitted the CLP to run in the [June 2022 national elections for commune-level offices](#) using the same registration documents it rejected in May 2023.

After the election, on August 22, Hun Sen, who had ruled Cambodia as prime minister since 1985, handed power to his son, now Prime Minister Hun Manet. Hun Sen remains head of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CunPP) and serves as Senate president. Despite the royalist party FUNCINPEC winning 5 out of the 125 national assembly seats, Cambodia remains tightly controlled by the CPP.

Attacks against Opposition Members

Ahead of the 2023 national elections, surveillance, intimidation, judicial harassment, and violent attacks intensified against members of the political opposition, both inside and outside Cambodia.

During [a speech](#) on [January 9](#), 2023, Hun Sen warned the opposition not to criticize the ruling CPP ahead of the upcoming elections and said defiance would be met with either punitive rulings by the courts, which are controlled by the CPP, or mob violence. In the months that followed, a number of opposition party members were assaulted in Phnom Penh in broad daylight while others were convicted or arrested on politically motivated criminal charges.

Opposition party members in Phnom Penh [described to Human Rights Watch](#) several similarities in the attacks against them: they were carried out on the street by men in dark clothes and wrap-around motorcycle helmets on motorbikes who used an extendable metal baton as a weapon. All the victims interviewed prior to the elections said they believed they were targeted because of their public participation in CLP activities.

On March 24, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court opportunistically [sentenced Cambodia National Heart Party's co-founder Seam Pluk, as well as 12 other members of the political opposition](#), to prison for politically motivated charges connected to gathering signatures on party registration documents. On March 21, authorities [arrested](#) two former Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) members for “insulting the monarchy” on Facebook. Authorities released both [Yim Sinorn](#) and [Hun Kosal](#) after they publicly apologized to both King Sihamoni and Hun Sen and agreed to resign from the opposition and join the ruling CPP.

In July, the government fined and banned 18 opposition party members from holding elected office for 10 to 20 years after being convicted in absentia [for inciting voters to spoil their national election ballots](#). They included seven [former lawmakers](#) from the dissolved CNRP (Sam Rainsy, Mu Sochua, Long Ry, Nuth Romdul, Hou Vann, Kong Saphea, and Eng Chhai Eang) [and 11 activists](#). Also in July, unknown assailants violently [targeted five additional opposition CLP members and activists](#).

[Attacks](#) against Cambodian opposition activists continued after the election. Three Khmer-speaking men assaulted Phorn Phanna, a refugee recognized by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), at about noon on August 22, 2023, in Rayong province in Thailand, injuring his face and chest. Phanna, a member of the CNRP, had fled to Thailand in July 2022 to escape government persecution.

On September 12, men with metal batons viciously attacked political critic Ny Nak and his wife Sok Synet in Phnom Penh, resulting in Nak being hospitalized with serious wounds to his head and extremities. The attack shares similarities with [assaults reported earlier in 2023](#) against members of the opposition CLP, which were never seriously investigated. Nak said he believed the attack was triggered by a number of recent public criticisms he made about the government.

On March 3, 2023, a court found political opposition leader [Kem Sokha](#) guilty of treason and sentenced him to a 27-year prison sentence and indefinitely suspended his political rights to vote and to stand for election. [UN experts](#) said the “politically motivated” conviction provided “further evidence of an ongoing pattern of the misapplication of laws to target political opponents and any critic of the Government,” urging the authorities “to restore Mr. Sokha’s liberty and ensure respect for his fundamental rights.” Sokha remains imprisoned at his residence in Phnom Penh.

Freedom of Media

The government effectively controls all Khmer-language national TV, radio stations, and newspapers. The few remaining independent outlets are subject to regular harassment, intimidation, and threats of shutdowns.

On February 12, Hun Sen announced the [revocation](#) of the operating license of the Voice of Democracy (VOD). The action followed the prime minister's objection to a [February 9 VOD article](#) alleging that Hun Manet had been improperly acting in place of his father by approving a financial aid package for Türkiye. The reporter, Pa Sokheng, fled the country to escape persecution and subsequently resettled as a refugee overseas. The [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and a group of [UN experts](#) expressed alarm over the move, urging authorities to reverse the decision.

In July, the government issued an order to internet service providers to block access to online websites and social media accounts of three major independent media outlets, [The Cambodia Daily](#), [Radio Free Asia](#) (RFA), and [Kamnotra](#). The action was taken under a directive authorizing the Department of Information and Audiovisual to block sites that “disseminate misleading news affecting the honor and reputation of the Royal Government.”

In September, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) demanded in a [letter posted on Facebook](#) that *CamboJA News*, one of the last remaining independent news outlets in the country, rectify “breaches of journalistic ethics” by removing “claims and speculations” perceived as linking the ministry and its minister to [an attack against and outspoken critic of the MAFF](#).

Union Leader Behind Bars

Since the Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld (LRSU) went on strike in December 2021 to call for the reinstatement of laid-off workers, Cambodian authorities have arbitrarily arrested, detained, and prosecuted union activists.

On January 3, 2022, the authorities charged [Chhim Sithar](#), the LRSU leader, and other trade union members with the crime of “incitement to commit a felony or disturb social security.” They held Sithar for 74 days in pretrial detention before releasing her on bail in March. The authorities rearrested Sithar on November 26, 2022, for violating bail conditions on international travel. Neither she nor her lawyer had been informed by the court or prosecutors about the travel restrictions.

On May 25, 2023, a court found Sithar and 8 trade unionists guilty, sentencing her to 2 years in prison and the other union members to between 1 and 1.5 years. On October 19, 2023, the Phnom Penh Appeal Court upheld the convictions of eight of them; the ninth did not appeal the lower court's verdict.

Facebook's Actions about Hun Sen

In March, Meta's oversight board, responsible for overseeing Facebook's content policies, selected Hun Sen's January 9 speech for consideration, stating that it “raises relevant policy questions around how the company should treat speech from political leaders.... This is particularly relevant in the context of potentially violent threats against political opponents from a national leader before an election in a country with a history of electoral violence and irregularity.”

The oversight board recommended in June that Hun Sen be suspended from the social media site for six months for posting a video violating rules against violent threats. The board said the company had been wrong not to remove the video.

Meta removed Hun Sen's speech but decided to reject the recommendation to suspend him from the platform.

Rights-Abusing Laws and Bills

On June 23, the effectively single-party CPP National Assembly [voted unanimously to amend the election law](#) to penalize anyone who boycotts the election from running as a candidate in future elections. Prospective candidates [must have voted](#) in at least two elections to qualify as a candidate in local and national elections. The amendments also criminalized any acts advocating for the boycott of an election or deliberately spoiling a ballot. The action was in response to CLP activists' calls on [social media](#) to [spoil ballots](#) or stay away from the election.

Cyberscam Centers

In 2023, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released [a report](#) detailing how at least 100,000 people in Cambodia have been enslaved for the purpose of carrying out online scams. Many of the victims originate from other Southeast Asian countries or from East Africa, South Asia, and China. Senior [Cambodian officials are accused of looking the other way](#) and ignoring this criminality.

Despite government claims made in a September 2022 [statement](#) that officials have raided compounds of suspected locations, the cyberscam human trafficking gangs continue to operate with impunity.

Women's and Girls' Rights

Child marriage is prevalent in [Cambodia](#) with 19 percent of girls being married before they turn 18, and 2 percent before they turn 15. It is more common in rural areas and among ethnic minority populations. In Mondulkiri and Ratanakiri provinces, 36 percent of girls are married before they turn 18.

In recent years, the trafficking of brides from Cambodia to China has increased. Many women and girls are tricked or [forced into marriages](#) with men in China, where they are vulnerable to abuses and often held prisoner, endure forced labor and sexual slavery, and are pressured to produce babies. [Brokers have increasingly been targeting girls in their teens as brides.](#)

Women's rights and land rights defenders continue to face harassment, threats, and criminal charges from private companies and well-connected elites as well as police and other authorities. On June 29, nine [land activists were arrested and charged in Koh Kong province while peacefully speaking out in defense of their local communities.](#) That same month, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [found](#) that Cambodia's failure to protect a rural woman human rights defender from forced eviction had constituted multiple rights violations.

Key International Actors

In March, the European Parliament adopted a resolution urging the release of Kem Sokha and all others detained on politically motivated charges.

In May, the European Union condemned the Cambodian authorities' decision to disqualify the CLP. And in July, it issued a statement criticizing the government's repression of the opposition, media, and civil society ahead of the elections.

Cambodia remains the only current beneficiary of the EU's [Everything But Arms](#)—a trade scheme that grants developing countries tariff-free access to the EU market conditioned on their respect for certain human and labor rights standards—to have been stripped of part of its trade benefits. The decision was taken in 2020, following the refusal by the government to backtrack on its [political crackdown](#) and on labor and land rights abuses, despite [years of enhanced engagement](#) between EU and Cambodian authorities.

In July, the United States government [issued a statement](#) that the Cambodian national elections “were neither free nor fair,” imposed visa restrictions on individuals who undermined democracy, and implemented a pause of certain foreign assistance programs.

The [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and a [group of UN independent human rights experts](#) also expressed concern about rights abuses, as well as severe restrictions on civic and political space, that the group of experts said “affected the credibility of the entire electoral process.”

The UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia by consensus in October.