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New laws on internet use and in response to the Covid-19 pandemic further extended restrictions on civil and political rights. Contraventions of Covid-19 regulations and criticism of the government were met with arrest and imprisonment. Members of the banned opposition party were sentenced to lengthy prison sentences after unfair mass trials. Environmental activists were especially targeted and Indigenous peoples barred from conservation efforts. Severely overcrowded prisons and drug detention centres undermined the right to health of detainees.

Background

A government crackdown on independent media, civil society organizations and political opposition that began in 2017 continued throughout 2021. The largest opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), remained banned following its court-ordered dissolution in 2017. The government's anti-drug campaign entered its fifth year.

Freedom of expression

On 16 February, Hun Sen signed into law the Sub-Decree on the Establishment of a National Internet Gateway which undermined the right to privacy and encouraged self-censorship. The regulation required all internet traffic to pass through a centralized oversight body charged with monitoring online activity and internet service providers to verify the identities of internet users. It also allowed for network connections “that affect safety, national revenue, social order, dignity, culture, tradition and customs” to be blocked or disconnected.

Authorities continued to use the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext to restrict freedom of expression. In early March, Shen Kaifeng, a Chinese citizen and editor-in-chief of the Chinese-language media outlet Angkor Today, was deported for publishing a story about vaccines deemed as “fake news” by the authorities. The same month, the National Assembly passed the Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of Covid-19 and other Serious, Dangerous and Contagious Diseases (Covid-19 law), which imposed severe penalties for contravening Covid-19 restrictions, including prison sentences of up to 20 years.

According to local NGO LICADHO, at least 258 people were arrested under the Covid-19 law between 10 and 25 April for disobeying administrative measures. Among these, 83 individuals were prosecuted and jailed. Dozens more were arrested for criticizing the government's Covid-19 response.

Freedom of association

Members of the banned opposition party, the CNRP, continued to face arbitrary arrests and prosecutions as well as violent attacks by unidentified assailants. In early January, mass trials of approximately 150 CNRP senior leaders and other party members and supporters began.¹ Many of the charges related to the planned return of self-exiled CNRP leaders to Cambodia in November 2019, which was characterized as a coup attempt by the authorities. On 1 March, nine senior party leaders were found guilty in their absence of “attempting to commit a felony” and “attack” under Articles 27 and 451 respectively of Cambodia's Criminal Code. Party co-founder Sam Rainsy was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment and others to between 20 and 22 years.

On 9 November, Veurn Veasna and Voeung Samnang, both CNRP supporters and UNHCR-recognized refugees, were forcibly returned to Cambodia from Thailand and detained on charges of incitement and Covid-19 law violations. Hun Sen had previously ordered Voeun Veasna's arrest after he published a poem criticizing him. The two men remained in pretrial detention at the end of the year.

The authorities failed to investigate physical attacks against CNRP members and supporters. In April, a 16-year-old CNRP supporter was assaulted by two men and hospitalized with a fractured skull. The attackers were not found. On 24 June, the same supporter was arrested and charged with incitement and insulting public officials in connection with comments made on the messaging app Telegram that were critical of the government. He was sentenced to eight months in prison and released in November after serving four and a half months. The supporter's father had been arrested in 2020 and was among dozens of CNRP members facing trial.

Repression of dissent

Authorities used the judicial system to unjustly arrest, prosecute and imprison human rights defenders and environmental activists. In August, trade union leader Rong Chhun was convicted of “incitement to commit a felony or cause social unrest” and sentenced to two years’ imprisonment. The trial followed public statements he made alleging community land loss resulting from the demarcation of the Cambodia-Viet Nam border. Opposition activists Sar Kanika and Ton Nimol were convicted of incitement and sentenced to 20 months’ imprisonment after calling for Rong Chhun’s release. Ten others who also protested against Rong Chhun’s imprisonment were arrested and charged with incitement.

Environmental activists affiliated with the campaign group Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC) faced judicial harassment throughout the year. In May, five MNC activists were convicted of incitement and sentenced to between 18 and 20 months’ imprisonment (two were convicted in their absence). They had been arrested after planning a protest march against government plans to privatize, fill and develop the largest remaining lake in the capital, Phnom Penh.² In June, three other MNC activists were charged variously with “plotting” and “insulting the King” (lèse majesté), along with one other, again charged in their absence. They had been arrested while documenting river pollution levels in Phnom Penh.³ The MNC members were among 26 activists released in mid-November who also included Rong Chhun and all those detained for protesting against his arrest. All were released subject to various conditions including limits to their rights to freedom of movement, association and peaceful assembly.

Environmental degradation and Indigenous peoples’ rights

Indigenous peoples and grassroots forest defenders were denied access to their traditional lands for conservation activities. In February, a request by the Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) to hold their annual tree blessing ceremony in the Prey Lang rainforest was rejected by the Ministry of the Environment for the second year running.⁴ PLCN members – most of whom were Indigenous Kuy people – remained banned from entering the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary to conduct community patrols. The Prey Preah Roka Forest Community Network were also prevented from engaging in forest patrols in Prey Vihear province.

In September, PLCN member Chan Thoeun was convicted of “intentional violence with aggravating circumstances” and given a two-year suspended prison sentence after a confrontation with an alleged logger during a forest patrol in 2020. In February, Ministry of Environment officers arrested and arbitrarily detained five environmental defenders for investigating illegal logging in Prey Lang forest. They were released three days later after committing not to enter the forest without permission from authorities.⁵ Deforestation rates increased by over 20% in 2021, which impacted severely on the ancestral lands of Indigenous peoples. Companies implicated in illegal logging continued to operate with impunity.

Right to health

In April, amid rising Covid-19 infection rates, the authorities imposed severe lockdown measures – some lasting several weeks – in parts of the capital and other cities.⁶ People in areas designated as “red zones” were prohibited from leaving their homes for any reason, which seriously impacted their access to food, healthcare and other essential goods and services. Humanitarian NGOs were barred from distributing food and other aid to at-risk residents in these areas. Some individuals who posted concerns or pleas for help on social media were threatened and intimidated by local authorities.

Severe overcrowding in prisons and drug detention centres, exacerbated by the anti-drug campaign, continued to violate detainees’ right to health. Civil society repeated calls for urgent action to curb the spread of Covid-19 among detainees, including through non-custodial alternatives to detention, but government action was limited and inadequate.⁷

1. [“Cambodia: 150 opposition politicians and supporters face jail in mass trials”, 14 January](#)
2. [“Cambodia: ‘Outrageous’ conviction of five environmental activists must be overturned”, 6 May](#)
3. [“Cambodia: Assault on environmental defenders escalates as four more charged”, 22 June](#)
4. [“Cambodia: Widespread illegal logging in Prey Lang rainforest amid ban on community patrols”, 25 February](#)
5. [“Cambodia’s Prey Lang: how not to protect a vital forest”, 13 April](#)
6. [“Cambodia: Authorities must avert Covid-19 humanitarian crisis”, 30 April](#)
7. [Cambodia: Urgently Address Covid-19 Outbreak in Prisons \(Index: ASA 23/4172/2021\), 24 May](#)

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