

Cambodia: New media code of conduct an attempt to restrict press freedom

(Bangkok, 19 May 2017) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) strongly condemns the imposition of a restrictive media code of conduct by the National Election Committee (NEC) ahead of the upcoming commune elections scheduled for 4 June 2017. The code of conduct includes vague language and restrictive rules, which violate the Cambodian Constitution that guarantees freedom of the press and expression under Article 41. The new guidelines are another attempt to stifle dissent. The Government of Cambodia, including the NEC, should guarantee this new code of conduct is not used to restrict press freedom, and assure that independent media can continue their work in safeguarding the transparency of the elections process.

Free, independent, and pluralistic media is not only an essential component of democracy, but crucial to assure free and fair elections. The long list of banned activities, during the two-week election campaign, which begins this Saturday, was signed as part of a 12-page code of conduct by Sik Bun Hok, Chairman of the NEC. According to the code of conduct, journalists are not allowed to ‘publish or distribute [information] that affects the public order or causes fear or any violence’. They are not allowed to ask questions to election officials regarding the election process. They are also prohibited from taking photos during voting.

The Cambodian Minister of Information Minister, Khieu Kanharith, signed a letter on 11 May 2017, addressed to media outlets, including TV and radio stations, newspapers and online news sites, instructing them to obey the regulations, if else their licences could be revoked or their businesses shut down completely.

Repressive legislation and regulations curtailing fundamental freedoms are not new in Cambodia. In 2015, the Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO)¹ was enacted to control non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with the Government ignoring criticism from around the world.² Political parties have been targeted too. In February 2017, the Senate approved amendments made by the National Assembly to the Law on Political Parties, allowing the Supreme Court and Ministry of Interior to dissolve any political party or ban any political party leader from political activity on vaguely defined grounds.³

Intimidation has become a common strategy of the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), to hold on to power and stifle any criticism. Ny Chakrya, Deputy Secretary-General of the NEC, and former staff of FORUM-ASIA member organisation, the Cambodian Human Right and Development Association (ADHOC), has been arbitrarily detained together with four ADHOC staff for over a year.⁴ FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of Cambodia once again to free the five human rights defenders, and end its crackdown on human rights defenders and organisations in the country.

¹ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=19191>

² <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=18813>

³ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=23145>

⁴ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=23714>

The Cambodian people have the right to seek and receive information. Media should be allowed to conduct their work without being exposed to threats, even more ahead of the upcoming commune elections. FORUM-ASIA therefore calls on the Cambodian Government, including the NEC, to guarantee the transparency and independence of the press, and assure that the code of conduct is not used to crackdown on media in covering the upcoming elections.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratization.

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