

Cambodia: The End of Democracy

(17 November 2017, Bangkok) The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) deplores the dissolution of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) by the Supreme Court of Cambodia yesterday.

The judiciary in Cambodia is closely controlled by the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and has been increasingly used to stifle the fundamental freedoms of the Cambodian people and to silence political opponents. Yesterday's decision – empowered by sweeping amendments to long-standing laws passed by the ruling CPP earlier this year – is a blatant attack on the already shrinking democratic and civic space in Cambodia. It violates the 1991 Paris Peace Accords and disenfranchises more than three million voters, over 40 percent of the electorate, who supported the CNRP at recent elections.

The request to dissolve the CNRP was filed by the Ministry of Interior on 6 October 2017 which claimed that the party had been plotting to overthrow the Government through a 'colour revolution' with US backing. On 16 October 2017, CPP lawmakers passed controversial amendments to the Law on Political Parties to redistribute CNRP parliamentary seats to minor parties, which had failed to win a single seat at the 2013 general election. The amendments also paved the way for the CPP to seize control of all 489 local council seats won by the CNRP in the 2017 commune elections. Meanwhile Kem Sokha, the President of the CNRP, was detained on 3 September 2017 on trumped up charges of treason.

In tandem with this attack against the CNRP, civil society and independent media have been increasingly targeted by Prime Minister Hun Sen's authoritarian regime. Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) - notably members of the election monitoring group 'Situation Room' – were visited and intimidated by large contingents of security forces on the night of 15 November 2017. Former Radio Free Asia reporters, Oun Chhin and Yeang Socheameta, were arrested on 14 November 2017 and detained on suspicion of supplying their former employer with news reports which police have deemed tantamount to espionage. They run the risk of being sentenced to up to 15 years in prison.

The decision to outlaw Cambodia's only significant and credible opposition force renders next year's general election meaningless. It has also dealt a severe blow to attempts to build a functioning democracy and respect for human rights in the country.

FORUM-ASIA calls upon the international community to take concrete action that will pressure the Cambodian Government to end its onslaught of democracy and human rights:

- Freeze all financial and technical support to the July 2018 general election and decentralisation process until a functioning democratic environment is restored;
- Make clear that the July 2018 general election will have no legitimacy unless immediate steps are taken to re-instate the opposition, and release Kem Sokha and other political prisoners;

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- Consider targeted sanctions against key individuals; and
- Review aid and trade agreements with the Cambodian Government.

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 democratisation.

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