

Cambodia: Threat to Close Down Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)

(Bangkok, 27 November 2017) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) strongly condemns the latest attempt by the Cambodian authorities to silence critical voices. The threat of Prime Minister Hun Sen against the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), one of the country's main groups advocating for human and civil rights, is representative of the alarming trend of shrinking space for civil society in the country.

On 26 November 2017, Hun Sen told a group of garment workers that: 'the CCHR must be shut down because it was created by foreigners. The Ministry of Interior should look into this.' His comments suggest Hun Sen believes there are grounds for an investigation because the CCHR was founded by Kem Sokha, and as such might be implicated in the treason charges against him.

Kem Sokha, leader of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), was detained on 3 September 2017 and charged with 'colluding with a foreign power'. The charges were part of a wider Government-pushed conspiracy theory, which alleges that a 'colour revolution' to topple the Government was underway, with civil society, independent media, and foreign Governments the alleged 'revolutionaries'. The trumped-up charge was based on a video leaked on Facebook of him talking to supporters in Australia in 2014, saying he received advice on political strategy from advisers in the United States. Relatedly, the CNRP, the only significant political opposition party in Cambodia, was dissolved by the Supreme Court of Cambodia on 16 November 2017, making next year's National Election virtually meaningless.

In a statement issued shortly after Hun Sen's allegation, CCHR affirmed its non-partisanship and independence from all political parties. It also stated that while a few former CCHR staff members have entered politics, joining both the CNRP and the Cambodian People's Party (CCP), they have no influence whatsoever on the organisation.

In recent months, several civil society organisations (CSOs), journalists, and political opponents of the ruling party have been targeted through fabricated accusations of conspiracy with foreign powers. Amid the fear of losing its stranglehold on Cambodian politics and public life, democratic spaces in Cambodia have been drastically shrunk at a rapid rate by the Government.

FORUM-ASIA denounces the crackdown on civil society organisations that promote democracy and human rights. FORUM-ASIA calls on the authorities to immediately cease any threat of an investigation into CCHR, to recognise it as an independent and unpartisan organisation, and allow it to operate unhindered.

As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Cambodian Government is obliged to guarantee the right to freedom of association. As included in Article 15 of the Paris Peace Accords, the Cambodian Government is also required to promote fundamental freedoms in the country embodied by relevant international human rights instruments. FORUM-ASIA reiterates its call on the Government to halt the harassment of independent media outlets, civil society organisations, and opposition parties, and abide fully by its international human rights obligations.

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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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