



Cambodia: Disqualification of opposition party reveals government's zero commitment to free and fair elections

(Bangkok, 17 May 2023) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation strongly condemn Cambodia's National Election Committee (NEC)'s [decision to bar the Candlelight Party \(CP\)](#) - the country's main opposition party—from contesting in the upcoming general election in July 2023.

This move further erodes Cambodian citizens' right to choose their representatives. FORUM-ASIA and CIVICUS urge the Government of Cambodia to stop using bureaucratic harassment and intimidation to silence opposition and dissent.

The NEC disqualified CP, citing a [failure](#) to fulfil documentation, including the missing original paperwork proving its registration with the Ministry of Interior. However, out of the 18 parties, CP was the only party whose registration was not approved by the NEC. In the context of the upcoming election, CP is the only party holding sufficient public support to compete with the ruling Cambodian People's Party.

“By blocking the main opposition party from running in the upcoming election, using the failure of submitting all required original documents as a pretext, the regime of Hun Sen is demonstrating a complete disregard to upholding the principle of free and fair elections. This bureaucratic harassment against the opposition party should not be tolerated. It must end,” said Mary Aileen Bacalso, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

The disqualification based on the failure to produce original documents before the electoral body contradicted the fact that CP was allowed to participate in the previous local elections in May 2022. Back then, CP produced a copy of its registration to the Ministry of Interior since the original document was reported to be missing during a raid of Cambodia National Rescue Party's (CNRP) office in 2017.

Worrying patterns of harassment

This is not the first incident of harassment experienced by the opposition party.

The current regime has also been known to go after CP's high ranking members. In fact, it previously threatened to dissolve all opposition parties and seize their pieces of property. There have also been reports of physical attacks against the opposition with impunity.

The refusal of the NEC to register CP comes on the heels of the [closure of Voice of Democracy](#)—one of Cambodia's few remaining independent media organisations— in February 2023, as well as the [sentencing of former CNRP leader Kem Sokha](#) to 27 years of house arrest in March 2023.

In August 2022, the [United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Cambodia](#) introduced 20 benchmarks to help promote human rights implementation in the country. One of the benchmarks is to 'restore and re-enfranchise a variety of political parties and ensure free and fair elections.' The recent disqualification of CP has clearly deviated from these recommendations and will further impact on the worsening trajectory of civic and democratic space in Cambodia.

FORUM-ASIA and CIVICUS urge the Cambodian Government to stop using the legal system to crush opposition, particularly before elections. We also call on the government to allow its citizens to exercise their right to vote for their representatives. The government should also comply with the recommendations made by international mechanisms for the protection of human rights and civic space in the country.

"Democratic elections necessitate open, inclusive, and credible political competition, as well as the freedom of citizens to choose their representatives. Holding free and fair elections will be virtually impossible in this repressive political climate. The international community must do more to halt this blatant assault on democracy and ensure that Cambodians can exercise their political rights without any fear or intervention. Without an opposition, there can be no free and fair elections in the country," said David Kode, Advocacy and Campaigns Lead of CIVICUS.

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is a global alliance dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world with 8,500 members in more than 175 countries. Based out of Johannesburg, CIVICUS has offices in New York and Geneva. www.civicus.org

For media inquiries, please contact:

- Communication and Media Programme, FORUM-ASIA, communication@forum-asia.org
- CIVICUS, media@civicus.org