



Cambodia: Dismiss defamation suit against Soeng Senkaruna of ADHOC

(Bangkok, 19 February 2024) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and CIVICUS call on the Phnom Penh Municipal Court to dismiss the politically motivated defamation lawsuit against Soeng Senkaruna, deputy head of the Human Rights and Land Rights Section and Senior Human Rights Investigator of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), a member organisation of FORUM-ASIA.

The [complaint](#) was brought by Hun Sen—former Cambodian Prime Minister and current leader of the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP)—following the publication of an article on the Cambodia Daily Khmer which quoted Senkaruna as saying that the CPP has often used the country’s judiciary to intimidate the political opposition and that political disputes should be resolved politically rather than through courts.

Hun Sen accused Senkaruna of dishonouring the CPP, stressing how his comments could incite hatred against the party ahead of the upcoming senate elections. CPP lawyers have demanded two billion riels (USD 500,000) for compensation.

Senkaruna’s quote was [based](#) on his interview with Radio France International regarding a lawsuit against Son Chhay, vice president of the opposition Candlelight Party. Chhay was convicted of defamation based on a complaint by the CPP and the National Election Committee in relation to his allegations of irregularities and vote rigging against the latter two in the 2022 commune council election.

However, Senkaruna claims that the newspaper misquoted him, clarifying that he did not mean to attack any political party. His remarks, Senkaruna stressed, were focused on strengthening respect for human rights, law, social justice, and democracy. Giving credence to Senkaruna’s claim is the fact that the Cambodia Daily Khmer published a [correction](#), acknowledging its mistake.

Through Facebook, Hun Sen [expressed](#) that the CPP would take anyone who insults the party to court.

Deteriorating Civic Space

Under Hun Sen the regime was known for deploying judicial harassment, threats, and online harassment against political opponents, non-governmental organisations and dissenting voices. These include the conviction against members of the opposition [Candlelight Party](#); the conviction of [labour union leaders and activists](#) from the Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld; and the [forced closure](#) of Voice of Democracy Cambodia, which was among the country’s few remaining independent media outlets.

Instead of complying with Meta’s Oversight Board’s decision to suspend Hun Sen’s Facebook account for threatening political opponents, the former prime minister [barred](#) the Oversight Board from entering Cambodia.

Now, his son Prime Minister Hun Manet is following in his footsteps as the authoritarian regime seeks to exert its influence beyond its borders. Recently, three Cambodian activists– Lem Sokha, Phan Phana, and Kung Raiya–were [arrested](#) by local authorities at the Thai border. They fled Cambodia to escape political persecution; however, they are now at risk of deportation.

The lawsuit against Senkaruna is just among the many cases which strongly reaffirm Cambodia’s deteriorating human rights situation.

Call to Action

FORUM-ASIA and CIVICUS stand in solidarity with Senkaruna alongside other human rights defenders and anyone freely expressing their opinions in relation to Cambodia’s political situation.

We call on the Cambodian Government to cease the practice of launching strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) through defamation, false charges, politically motivated lawsuits, and other repressive laws against those expressing political opinions. As a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Cambodia is bound by an obligation to uphold people’s freedom of expression and right to information.

‘The Phnom Penh Municipal Court must immediately dismiss the defamation lawsuit against Soeng Senkaruna. The Cambodian Government must ensure that its people can safely and freely express their political opinions without fear of reprisals. The lawsuit is clearly politically motivated and has no bearing on the pursuit of justice,’ said Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

‘Hun Manet seems to be picking up where his father left off by targeting those critical of the regime, including those from civil society. These actions are inconsistent with Cambodia’s international human rights obligations. The international community must speak out and stand with Soeng Senkaruna and others which the regime is seeking to target and silence,’ said Josef Benedict, Asia-Pacific researcher for CIVICUS.

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About FORUM-ASIA:

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

About CIVICUS:

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

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