

Cambodia: Respect fundamental freedoms to ensure free and fair commune elections

(Bangkok, 3 June 2017) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) expresses its grave concern over intensified restrictions on fundamental freedoms ahead of the commune elections, including intimidation and threats against human rights organisations. Remarks made by the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, prior to the commune elections on 4 June 2017, that a victory of the opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) will cause unrest in the country have created a climate of fear. FORUM-ASIA also condemns the Cambodian Government's plan to deploy armed forces at polling stations all over the country during the commune elections on Sunday.

Tomorrow is another critical moment for democracy in Cambodia, when citizens will exercise their right to vote in the commune elections prior to the general elections in 2018. FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of Cambodia and authorities to respect the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly of the Cambodian people, and ensure that they can exercise their right to vote without fear.

These 2017 commune elections is a vital moment for democracy in Cambodia, after rivalry between the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and CNRP in 2013 general elections brought about unrest. The CPP was accused of electoral fraud and the CNRP later mobilised its supporters and allies to protest against the results. The protests turned violent when authorities used force to disperse protesters in Phnom Penh. Sunday is also seen as a test for both parties' towards 2018.

'The Cambodian people must exercise their right to vote without fear. The authorities must ensure that fundamental freedoms, especially of expression and of peaceful assembly are fully respected. Citizens of the country should be able to freely express their opinions and gather in public spaces to voice out their concerns before, during, and after the elections,' says John Samuel, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

The protection of fundamental freedoms is emphasised in the 2014 report of the former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of expression, Frank La Rue, and the 2013 report of the former UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai. Both UN Special Rapporteurs agree on the basic principles that voters must be able to receive full and accurate information and express their political affiliation without fear, while political parties must be able to exercise their right to campaign and communicate their political messages freely without interference or attack. They further state that the equal protection of fundamental freedom for all citizens and political actors must be heightened in the context of elections.

'We call on the Cambodian Government and authorities to ensure that the commune elections on Sunday will be conducted in a free and fair manner with full respect for the civil and political rights of the Cambodian people. Only through free and fair elections can a genuine democracy be established in the country,' concludes John Samuel.

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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