

## **Cambodia: FORUM-ASIA demands immediate release of Kem Sokha**

(3 September 2017, Bangkok) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) condemns the arrest of Kem Sokha, President of Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), currently the main opposition party, and a Member of Parliament. Kem Sokha is being accused of 'treason', which is punishable under Article 443 of the Penal Code, which covers conspiracy with foreign power. His arrest followed a raid on his house on the night of 2 September, this Saturday.

It is reported the police lacked an arrest warrant and have accused Kem Sokha of an offence in flagrante delicto. The raid followed the leaking of a video on Facebook earlier that day, showing Kem Sokha talking to supporters in Melbourne, Australia, in 2014. His supporters claim the video was heavily edited.

Kem Sokha's arrest is part of a new wave of repression. In recent weeks multiple radio stations have been shutdown, a prominent newspaper faces Government-ordered closure, and non-governmental organisations have been threatened with sanctions.

Early Sunday morning, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Interior, Khieu Sopheak announced that Kem Sokha had been moved to Correctional Centre 3, a remote prison located in Tbuong Khmum Province, some 130 kilometres east of Phnom Penh. The arrest of Kem Sokha is a major escalation of the intensifying crackdown on anyone who challenges the Government, whether they are media, civil society, or from the opposition parties, ahead of the 2018 general election.

In 2016, Kem Sokha spent over six months under de facto house arrest and was convicted in absentia for refusing to comply with a politically-motivated investigation. He received a Royal Pardon at the behest of the Government in that case.

The arrest is the most significant targeting of the CNRP leadership so far. Former CNRP leader, Sam Rainsy, was forced to leave the country in 2015 as he faced multiple politically-motivated charges, including for implying possible Government collusion in the high-profile murder of political activist, Kem Ley. In October 2016, Rainsy's exile was formalised on Government orders. Although this order has since been rescinded, he could still face immediate imprisonment should he return.

In February 2017, Rainsy resigned as President of CNRP in response to the first of two rounds of amendments to the Law on Political Parties. His convictions could be used as grounds for the dissolution of the party under these amendments. Kem Sokha replaced him as President. Despite growing restrictions, the commune election in June saw a significant improvement of CNRP's political influence, with them gaining 5,007 local council seats compared to Hun Sen's Cambodia People's Party (CPP) obtaining 6,503 seats.

'The general election in Cambodia next year is a critical moment for democracy in Cambodia, 26 years after the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1991. This crackdown on dissenters and the opposition leaves the free and fairness of next year's elections in dire jeopardy. Kem Sokha's arrest makes a mockery out of the freedom of speech,' says John Samuel, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

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FORUM-ASIA urges the Cambodian Government to assure the immediate and unconditional release of Kem Sokha and to drop all investigations against him. The Cambodian Government must cease the crackdown on and harassment of media, civil society, and opposition parties. Cambodia must abide by its national and international human rights obligations, and uphold the values of democracy, especially if the 2018 elections are to retain their legitimacy.

**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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