

Cambodia: Drop all Charges against Journalist Sovann Rithy and Respect Media Freedom

(Bangkok, 10 April 2020) – Cambodian authorities must release journalist Sovann Rithy without conditions and reinstate the licence of TVFB immediately, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) said.

Sovann Rithy, the founder of TVFB, was detained and charged on 7 April 2020 for incitement for quoting Prime Minister's Hun Sen from a speech where he said that 'motorbike taxis can sell their motorbikes if they face bankruptcy, as the government has no ability to help.'

On 8 April 2020, Cambodia's Ministry of Information revoked TVFB's media license on the grounds that it published 'information which contains incitement, affects social security, order and safety'¹.

Reprisals against independent journalists and media have been used as means to repress dissent in the already closed civic space in the country. Cambodia, with a long and sustained campaigned persecuting journalists in the country, ranked 143 of 179 countries in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index.

On 9 April 2020, authorities charged Sovann Rithy with 'provocation to commit a felony' under Article 495 of the Cambodian Criminal Code. Police officers justified the charges arguing that the Prime Minister's quote was not to be taken seriously and should not be quoted on social media.² Sovann Rithy could face up to two years' imprisonment and a fine of up to 4,000,000 Cambodian Riel (around 980 USD), should he be convicted.³

Under Hun Sen's regime, Cambodia's independent media face continuous harassment. Authorities intimidate and closely monitor independent media to stifle any form of criticism against the regime. In 2017, the Cambodian Daily was forced to close its doors after 24 years in operation.⁴ That same year, two former Radio Free Asia journalists, Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin, were arrested and slapped with baseless charges of providing information to a foreign state.⁵

The continued repression of the media, including the latest attacks against Sovann Rithy and TVFB, illustrate how the Government has positioned itself as the sole arbitrator of truth. The trend of silencing journalists and dissenting opinions has cultivated a climate of fear and deepened the culture of impunity in the country.

¹<https://www.voacambodia.com/a/online-journalist-charged-with-incitement-for-reporting-hun-sen-s-comments-/5365676.html>

² <https://cambojanews.com/journalist-arrested-for-repeating-hun-sens-advice-to-motorbike-taxi-drivers/>

³https://www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/khm/criminal_code_of_the_kingdom_of_cambodia_html/Cambodia_Criminal-Code-of-the-Kingdom-of-Cambodia-30-Nov-2009-Eng.pdf

⁴ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=24672>

⁵ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=30681>

Following the Cambodian Parliament's approval for a draft law on the state of emergency and its provisions to ban news deemed to generate unrest,⁶ FORUM-ASIA is deeply concerned that reprisals against critics and journalists will only intensify.

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of Cambodia to immediately free Sovann Rithy, drop the trumped-up charges against him, and to end all forms of harassment against journalists and the media.

At a time when access to information is vital to address the COVID-19 pandemic, Governments in the region are increasingly misusing emergency decrees to exercise authoritarianism. It is therefore imperative that the Government of Cambodia respect the right of all to freely seek, receive and express opinion without fear of reprisal.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 81 member organisations in 21 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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⁶ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2020/04/10/cambodian-parliament-adopts-draft-law-on-state-of-emergency>