

Cambodians find their voice – freedom of expression and assembly in the Kingdom of Wonder

OHCHR Cambodia helped to significantly increase understanding about freedom of expression and assembly, which in 2013 led to a dynamic and expressive election year



Photo: OHCHR Cambodia

Demonstration in Phnom Penh on 29 December 2013

In the year following the general election in July 2013, Cambodia witnessed a political awakening during which, according to Government estimates, as many as 850 demonstrations were conducted throughout the country. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Cambodia contributed to a greater enjoyment of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly through a diverse range of activities to promote and protect these rights.

The traditional relationship between the Government and the people in Cambodia has often been characterized as akin to a parent-child relationship, with ordinary people owing an almost filial duty to the Government whom they are duty-bound not to challenge. In the year following the election, there was a sea change in the attitudes of ordinary people – whether supporters of the Government or the opposition – insofar as demanding their rights was concerned. The country witnessed an unprecedented number of public gatherings, including political rallies, labour strikes, and protests about land disputes and environmental issues.

While the reaction of the authorities to the demonstrations varied – on the one hand showing a general respect for freedom of assembly in 2013, and then applying a blanket ban on demonstrations in 2014 – it is clear that the people of Cambodia have awoken to their right to speak out and to demonstrate and in 2013 sought to exercise those rights with a frequency and on a scale never seen before.

In the two decades since the UN-administered elections in Cambodia in 1993, local and international human rights organizations have strived to increase understanding amongst the Cambodian population of the human rights responsibilities of the Government, including

“There has been a shift in attitudes in this country, a political awakening in which people have come to understand their rights to expression and assembly and have stood up to claim them. OHCHR has played a very important role in reaching this milestone working closely with local civil society organisations through years of training and dissemination activities increasing the understanding in Cambodia of the rights to freedom of expression and assembly.”

Ou Virak
Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the
Cambodian Center for Human Rights

on freedom of expression and assembly. Numerous workshops and trainings have been held throughout the country raising awareness among ordinary people of their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Information has been disseminated through various channels – radio, print media, written reports, workshops and, increasingly in recent years, via the internet. The change in attitudes in the past year – with ordinary people finding their voice – is due in no small part to the continuous efforts of human rights actors in the country over the years.

Other activities of OHCHR to promote and protect freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in Cambodia include radio shows on the content of these rights; the monitoring of demonstrations; and the dissemination of written and animated materials nationwide. To further the peaceful exercise of these rights, in 2009 OHCHR jointly published with the Ministry of Interior an Implementation Guide to the Law on Peaceful Demonstrations, outlining the rights of people to freedom of assembly and expression as well as the roles of organizers of demonstrations and the responsibilities of the authorities under the Law. The Implementation Guide details the procedural requirements for organizing demonstrations. In the years since, OHCHR Cambodia has provided extensive training on the Law and Implementation Guide to hundreds of civil society representatives, including NGO workers, trade unionists, community activists; LGBTI rights advocates, and journalists to help all those who organize peaceful demonstrations to abide by the law in doing so and thereby reduce the risk of arrest.

Cambodians remark that their country today is an entirely different one from what it was only two years ago, so expressive are the people today. A sound system of human rights protection requires a solid level of awareness on the part of both duty-bearers in regard to their duties to uphold human rights, as well as of rights-holders to claim them. Cambodian rights-holders have now amply demonstrated that they are capable of fulfilling their part. Through their continuous demands for solutions, justice and accountability, they hold the key that will ensure that the nation will eventually become one that fully respects, protects and promotes human rights.

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