

Cambodia: UN experts express concerns about media freedoms ahead of vote

GENEVA (15 June 2018) – UN human rights experts* have called on Cambodian authorities to respect and ensure the right to freedom of opinion and expression, citing concerns about a clampdown on the media ahead of a general election on 29 July.

Last month the National Election Committee (NEC) issued a media code of conduct for the ballot, prohibiting the publication of news which may lead to confusion and/or loss of confidence in the vote, publishing information deterring people from voting, and expressing personal opinion or prejudice.

“The prohibitions on the media in the code raise serious concerns relating to media freedoms,” the experts said. “These prohibitions use broad and imprecise terminology that could lead to sweeping restrictions on the media that would be incompatible with international standards.

“Journalists have a responsibility to report on many issues in the run-up to an election, in particular controversial issues. Such reporting is an integral part of transparent and responsible media reporting during an election. It helps voters to make informed choices.

“The prohibitions also have a negative impact on the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, necessary conditions for public participation in electoral contexts,” said the experts.

The NEC prohibitions are similar to those issued before the 2017 commune elections. Concerns relating to them were noted in the last annual report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia.

Leaders of the dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) have called on voters to boycott the election or abstain from voting as a sign of protest.

In response, the NEC chairperson has called for legal action against those calling for the boycott. The chairperson claimed that such calls were affecting public order and national security, and causing confusion leading to the loss of trust in the election.

Under Cambodian law, voting is not compulsory.

“Whatever the nature of the election, all human rights must be respected and ensured. We encourage the Cambodian authorities to ensure that all people are freely able to express their political views and opinions – including on the option of abstaining from voting,” the experts said.

“While both Cambodian and international human rights law rightly prohibit intimidation or coercion of voters, a call for boycott of an election neither coerces nor intimidates, nor does it, of itself, affect public order. Instead, it leaves voters free to decide whether to participate or not.”

Concerning the broader context of the general election, Rhona Smith, an independent expert appointed by the Human Rights Council to monitor the human rights situation in Cambodia, [in April urged the Government to release immediately opposition leaders in detention](#) and lift a ban on the main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party taking part in the July 29 general election in order to ensure a genuine multi-party democracy in Cambodia.

ENDS

***Experts: Professor Rhona Smith, [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia](#); Mr. David Kaye, [Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#); Mr. Clément Nyaletsossi Voulé, Special Rapporteur on the [rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association](#).**

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