Cambodia: UN expert urges Government embrace final opportunity for “genuine” election

GENEVA (30 April 2018) – To ensure a genuine multi-party democracy in Cambodia which respects its citizens’ participation rights, the Government must immediately release detained opposition leaders and lift a ban on the opposition taking part in the July 29 general election, a UN expert says.

“No election can be genuine if the main opposition party is barred from taking part,” said Rhona Smith, an independent expert appointed by the Human Rights Council to monitor the human rights situation in Cambodia. On Monday, the National Election Committee started the two-week process of registration of political parties for the vote.

“Those who currently rule the country have one final opportunity to reverse the current trajectory, and return instead to the constitutional path of multi-party democracy and genuine elections – ensuring a level playing field for all political parties,” Smith said.

Last November, the main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) was dissolved and 118 of its members barred from political activity for five years. All of the party’s local and national seats were reallocated to unelected members of the ruling and other parties.

The leader of the dissolved CNRP, Kem Sokha, who was detained in September, remains in prison on treason charges related to comments he made in 2013 about his grassroots political strategy to challenge the current Government. Another former President of the party, Sam Rainsy, is living in self-imposed exile, after a number of cases were filed against him in Cambodia.

Many other CNRP members and supporters have also fled abroad, fearing arrest and harassment. Some have also been imprisoned, along with former leaders of other political parties, including Nhek Bun Chhay, of the Khmer National United Party, and Soun Sereyrotha, of the Khmer Power Party.

Despite concerns of irregularities, the CNRP won over 44 percent of the popular vote in the last national elections in 2013, and was the only opposition party in the national assembly with 55 of 123 seats. The CNRP again won nearly 44 percent in the commune (local) elections in June 2017.

The Government has also clamped down on civil society and the media by closing and suspending several NGOs and media companies, and targeting individuals within those organisations.
“All Cambodians have a right to openly debate and discuss political affairs; the media must be allowed to scrutinise and criticise, as well as inform the public; and civil society, including NGOs, should be encouraged to play an active role in State affairs,” said Smith.

“A liberal multi-party democracy is an essential, entrenched and non-amendable feature of the Constitution of Cambodia.”

ENDS

Professor Rhona Smith (United Kingdom) was appointed as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia by the UN Human Rights Council in March 2015.

Special Rapporteurs, they are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms. Special Procedures mandate-holders are independent human rights experts appointed by the Human Rights Council to address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. They are not UN staff and are independent from any government or organization. They serve in their individual capacity and do not receive a salary for their work.

Check the Special Rapporteur’s reports on Cambodia.

UN Human Rights, country page: Cambodia

For more information and media requests, please contact: Esther Lam (+41 229289108 / elam@ohchr.org); Sovanna Mann (+855 17 875 607/ smann@ohchr.org)

For media inquiries related to other UN independent experts please contact In Geneva: Jeremy Laurence, UN Human Rights – Media Unit (+41 22 917 9383 / jlaurence@ohchr.org)

This year, 2018, is the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN on 10 December 1948. The Universal Declaration – translated into a world record 500 languages – is rooted in the principle that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” It remains relevant to everyone, every day. In honour of the 70th anniversary of this extraordinarily influential document, and to prevent its vital principles from being eroded, we are urging people everywhere to Stand Up for Human Rights: www.standup4humanrights.org.