

Cambodia: UN experts concerned at Government moves to silence political opponents

GENEVA (19 June 2019) – UN human rights experts* have expressed concern at an escalating trend of suppression by the Cambodian Government of dissenting opinions in what appears to be an attempt to intimidate or silence political opinion.

According to information received, more than 140 members of the former Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) have been questioned by the authorities, summoned or detained in relation to attendance at gatherings and comments made in support of the two former leaders of the court-dissolved CNRP, Mr. Kem Sokha and Mr. Sam Rainsy. Some of the concerned individuals had posted videos of the gatherings and the statements in support of Kem Sokha and Sam Rainsy on Facebook.

“We are concerned about the use of criminal law to target free speech, both offline and online,” said the experts. “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right is one of the essential foundations for a democratic and just society. Restrictions on freedom of expression must be limited and strictly defined and statements of support for political leaders do not fall within such permitted limitations.”

Any restrictions on freedom of expression or freedom of assembly must be narrowly defined, the experts said. Restrictions must be based in law, be necessary to support legitimate grounds such as protecting public order or national security, and they must be proportionate to meet the desired end. Charges of ‘incitement to commit a felony’ that the authorities have levelled against some of the concerned individuals are not appropriate restrictions on expressions of support for political figures.

The experts also expressed concern that the summons issued to many of the concerned individuals appear to contravene the right to due process and a fair trial, in particular the principle of equality of arms and the right to have adequate time and facilities for the preparation of one’s defence, including access to appropriate information.

They said summons issued to many of the former CNRP members referred to alleged violations of the Supreme Court’s verdict on the dissolution of the CNRP, from 16 November 2017, without specifying the nature of the alleged violation. The experts added that the defence lawyer was not allowed to make copies of any of the case files in order to prepare an adequate defence in time.

On 16 November 2017, the Supreme Court dissolved the CNRP, then the main opposition party and the only one in the National Assembly, effectively making Cambodia a one-Party State under the Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

“We call on the Government to reverse the current downward trend in enjoyment of political rights and fundamental freedoms,” the experts said. “It is time the Government leads a change of the political culture to one of dialogue with a focus on issues rather than people, as a way to move ahead and to create a solid basis for durable peace, sustainable development and the enjoyment of all human rights.”

ENDS

() UN experts: Rhona Smith (United Kingdom) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia; David Kaye, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.*

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