

Cambodia: UN Special Rapporteur calls for restoration of democracy and vibrant civil society

GENEVA (11 December 2017) – As the world marked the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948, Cambodia should return to a path of multi-party democracy and ensure full freedom for civil society and journalists to operate, said Rhona Smith, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the country.

“I am particularly concerned about the dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) on 16 November, the banning of 118 CNRP members from political activity for five years and the reallocation of all the party's local and national seats to unelected members of the ruling and other parties,” said the Special Rapporteur.

“This has denied a significant portion of the population of their right to take part in public affairs through their freely chosen representatives.”

The leader of the dissolved CNRP, Kem Sokha, who was detained in September, remains in prison on charges related to comments he made in 2013 about his grassroots political strategy to challenge the current Government. Many other party members have fled the country; and members have reported intimidation by the authorities and pressure to “defect” to the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP).

“With general elections due in July 2018, I call on the Government to restore the space for any Cambodians to exercise the right to stand for election without fear or intimidation,” the Special Rapporteur said.

“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 organizations. This can only be counter-productive and takes away an important mechanism for societies to openly question, debate and challenge ideas.”

Political debate, critical analysis and multiple sources of information are particularly important before elections to ensure voters understand candidates' policies and goals, she stressed.

She added: “This is a time for all Cambodians to reflect on the path the country is currently taking. Restoring democracy and accepting vibrant civil society, even civil society that may be critical of government, is not only about human rights, it is also about paving the way for sustainable development and lasting peace.”

Restricting Cambodians' voices could ultimately threaten the stability that the Government and the people had worked hard to build, the Special Rapporteur warned.

“Cambodia is at an important crossroads. Unprecedented economic growth has helped lift many out of poverty and has provided the basis to improve social protection and access to education, decent work and health care,” said Professor Smith.

“Yet for gains in economic and social rights to be entrenched, it is important to also respect civil and political rights, such as press freedoms and freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association.” Professor Smith added. The fact that the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights was no longer under investigation and could return to its work was “a step in the right direction” she said.

“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed almost 70 years ago next year, enshrined a global vision of peace, development and stability based on freedom from both fear and want. The two are strongly linked and one cannot exist without the other,” Professor Smith added.

The Cambodian Government had recently recommitted itself to this vision through the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which sets targets to build peaceful and just societies alongside combating poverty and hunger, in partnership with civil society, the Special Rapporteur noted.

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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. As Special Rapporteur, she is 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.

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