

Country Summary: Cambodia

Introduction

Cambodia responded to the pandemic with a range of measures which increased restrictions on civic freedoms and other human rights in the country. The restrictions were especially concerning given the government's history of repressing civic freedoms under broadly worded laws, with serious punishments for violations. In particular, the government's arrest of journalists for merely reporting on the pandemic, as well as citizens for expressing opinions or sharing Covid-19-related information, was highly draconian. The government also used its Covid-19 emergency law to break up strikes, and failed to protect privacy in its contact-tracing efforts.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The government used new and existing laws to restrict information sharing during the pandemic. Amongst new laws, the government passed the Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 and other Serious, Dangerous, and Contagious Diseases, which contained several broad provisions, including Article 11 prohibiting the obstruction of pandemic enforcement measures. Shortly after the passage of the law, authorities arrested at least six individuals for violating Article 11 after they expressed opinions or shared information that authorities interpreted to criticize the Cambodian government's pandemic response (Licadho, [2022](#)). The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Cambodia noted that of the over 700 people arrested by authorities under the Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 and other Serious, Dangerous and Contagious Diseases, several had been arrested after commenting on the pandemic (Al Jazeera, [2021](#)).

Authorities also used existing laws to restrict expression during the pandemic. From January to April 2020, authorities arrested at least thirty people on a range of charges including incitement, conspiracy, and the spreading of false information under the Criminal Code. Those arrested included opposition activists and journalists who criticized the government's response to the pandemic (HRW, [2020](#)). For example, the government accused a journalist of causing chaos and posing harm to social security and arrested him under Article 495 of the Criminal Code, which deals with acts of incitement to cause felonies. The journalist had quoted the Prime Minister's remark that the government was unable to support motorcycle drivers during the pandemic, and his suggestion that they sell their bikes to handle their expenses (Camboja News, [2020](#)).

In another case, a member of Cambodia's banned political opposition party was arrested on the basis of inciting social unrest by claiming that Chinese-made vaccines

aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19 were unsafe and had caused several deaths (Radio Free Asia, [2021](#)). Another notorious example involved the deportation of the editor-in-chief of Angkor Today for reporting that Chinese nationals in Cambodia had been offered chances to buy shots of the COVID-19 vaccine; the Ministry of Information also revoked Angkor Today's license to operate in the country (CPJ, [2021](#)).

Independent media were also restricted from entering 'red zones,' with journalists additionally warned not to report information that could "provoke turmoil in society." Similarly, farmers were warned not to upload 'negative pictures' related to food shortage and starvation concerns in red-zones area (HRW, [2021](#)).

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

The Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 and other Serious, Dangerous, and Contagious Diseases also prohibited public gatherings and assemblies. Authorities used the law and its sub-decrees, in combination with provisions criminalizing "incitement" under the Criminal Code, to break up strikes and demonstrations in Cambodia. These included a strike regarding improper compensation and layoffs targeting union members and leaders in December 2021, multiple strikes in 2022, including the Naga-World casino strike, an assembly about a land dispute in the Samrong commune, and an assembly in the Svay Chrum district to protest inadequate compensation for the government seizure of land, among other incidences (Licadho, [2022](#)).

In general, enforcement of lockdowns was overly militarized, with high fines for quarantine violations, excessive arrests, and even the 'caning' of those found in violation of lockdowns (Amnesty International, [2021](#)). In one case, approximately 20,000 people were detained over two weeks in August 2021 for violating curfew and restriction measures, including over 4,000 people in one night (Khmer Times, [2021](#)).

RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND SURVEILLANCE

In a blatant violation of privacy, the Cambodian Ministry of Health decided to disclose the identity and personal information of individuals who tested positive for Covid-19 in the media and published lists of these individuals on its social media site. The published details include names, age, sex, work place, home address, and in several instances, photos, and triggered a statement of concern from UN human rights experts (OHCHR, [2020](#)).

The Cambodian government also adopted a voluntary COVID-19 contact-tracing method. Users of the "Stop COVID-19" QR Code system could scan codes in registered establishments to indicate that they had visited the establishment. Civil society raised privacy concerns about the tracking system because authorities did not clarify the information gathered, or how it was storing or using data gathered by the system, posing privacy and surveillance risks (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

MANDATORY VACCINATION AND RESTRICTIONS ON ACCESS TO PUBLIC SPACES

Authorities made COVID-19 vaccination mandatory to enter both public and private spaces, including educational institutions, markets, restaurants, and other establishments. However, there was uneven distribution of the vaccine due to limited supply (Khmer Times, [2021](#)). Authorities also provided limited guidance on medical exemptions to the vaccine (HRW, [2021](#)). Mandatory vaccination, coupled with limited vaccine distribution and lack of acknowledgement of legitimate vaccine exemptions, may have contributed to some individuals' inability to join public meetings and gatherings, a restriction on their civic freedoms.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS

In mid-March 2020, the Ministry of Health reported that several Muslims from Cambodia who had returned from a religious gathering in Malaysia tested positive for the virus. This report increased discrimination against Muslims during the pandemic (VOA, [2020](#)). Reporting on COVID-19 statistics also singled out Muslims—a “Khmer Islam” category was included in statistics on infection rates (PEW Research, [2020](#)), leading to an increase in hate speech and affecting the ability and willingness of stigmatized groups to operate in the public sphere—such as through organizing and attending demonstrations or engaging in advocacy—for fear of retaliation.

Conclusion

The pandemic response of the Cambodian government clamped down on civic freedoms and other rights in a highly disproportionate manner. Cambodians experienced limitations on their ability to share and access information about the pandemic, and demonstrate for their interests. Many of the measures deployed by the government merely served authoritarian ends such as information control, while failing to make any difference, or even exacerbating, public health outcomes.