

FREEDOM ON THE NET 2023

Cambodia

44
/100

PARTLY FREE

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	13 / ₂₅
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	17 / ₃₅
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	14 / ₄₀

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

43/100 ● **Partly Free**

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the [research methodology](#) and [report acknowledgements](#).



TOP

Overview

Internet freedom remains under threat in Cambodia. Ahead of elections that occurred in July 2023, after the coverage period, Cambodian authorities arrested opposition members for their online activities and forced the closure of independent media outlets. Internet users often face arrest for online activity, perpetuating an environment that is characterized by fear and self-censorship. Authorities have sought to establish a single national internet gateway that would facilitate greater censorship and surveillance. Former members of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), an opposition party that was dissolved by court order in 2017 and has since operated in exile, faced heightened monitoring, harassment, and imprisonment for their online activities.

Cambodia's political system has been dominated by former prime minister Hun Sen, current premier Hun Manet, and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) for more than three decades. While the country conducted semicompetitive elections in the past, the 2018 and 2023 elections were held in a severely repressive environment. The CPP government has maintained pressure on opposition supporters, independent press outlets, and demonstrators with intimidation, politically motivated prosecutions, and violence.

Key Developments, June 1, 2022 - May 31, 2023

- Government officials sought to curb news coverage critical of the government, sometimes responding with website blocks, content removals, and delicensing of media outlets ahead of the July 2023 elections (see B1, B2, and B6).
- The February 2023 revocation of the media license of Voice of Democracy (VOD) and the March 2023 revocation of three Khmer-language outlets' licenses marked a significant decline in the availability of independent news (see B6).

- A September 2022 draft of the Cybersecurity Law revealed that it would empower authorities to seize computer systems and access user data under broad circumstances related to national security and public order (see C4).
- Former CNRP members faced prison sentences of five to seven years for their activism, including for criticism of the government on social media, as mass trials continued ahead of the July 2023 elections (see C3).
- Journalists, activists, and other internet users continued to face physical and online harassment for their online posts, with numerous journalists and activists arrested or threatened over their legitimate reporting (see C3 and C7).

A. Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?

4/6

Internet usage and smartphone adoption in Cambodia has boomed in recent years but decreased during the coverage period. As of January 2023, Cambodia's internet penetration rate was 67.5 percent, a 11.3 percent decrease from previous year. **1** Ookla recorded Cambodia's median mobile internet download speed at 22.79 megabits per second (Mbps) in May 2023 **2**; Cambodia ranked 96th globally for mobile internet download speeds. The country's median fixed-line broadband download speed was 22.81 Mbps; it ranked 126th globally in this category. **3** Telecommunications companies have attributed the increase in penetration rate to the heightened use of social media, with 88 percent of the country's over-18 population regularly using such services. **4**

Internet access, however, is constrained by poor infrastructure. Nationwide power outages have posed challenges to telecommunications companies and impose additional constraints on computer and internet use. **5** In March and May 2023, Électricité du Cambodge (EdC), the power utility, announced plans for maintenance work, causing planned blackouts that lasted as long as eight hours in parts of Phnom Penh. **6** Outages continued in Phnom Penh and Kandal Province in June 2023, after

the coverage period. ⁷ EdC coordinated repair-related blackouts in 2021 and 2022.

⁸

Some other infrastructure improvements, such as the rollout of a “smart-grid” electrical system in the last 10 percent of households in remote villages living without electricity, started in December 2020. ⁹ However, internet connections can still be extremely slow, especially in remote and rural areas (see A2). Broadband internet services depend on fixed-line networks that are not as readily available in rural areas, thus inhibiting wider internet penetration. As a result, in 2018, internet service providers (ISPs) constructed two submarine fiber-optic internet networks connecting to high-speed international connections, the Malaysia-Cambodia-Thailand (MCT) cable and the Asia-Africa-Europe 1 (AAE-1) cable, covering over 23,000 miles. ¹⁰ In February 2020, Telecom Cambodia signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Cambodia Fiber-Optic Communication Network Co., Ltd. (CFOCN) to construct a metropolitan and regional fiber-optic backbone network. ¹¹ There were no significant updates to the project’s construction by the end of the coverage period.

The Cambodian government has demonstrated a commitment to introduce fifth-generation (5G) technology for mobile networks across the country. ¹² In April 2020, it signed a MoU with the Chinese firm Huawei to build a 5G network in Cambodia. ¹³ Several mobile service providers have also aimed to introduce 5G services, including Cellcard, Smart Axiata, and Metfone. ¹⁴ However, the 5G rollout stalled as the government has not issued a 5G policy, roadmap, or approvals to permit the operation of 5G networks by the end of the coverage period. ¹⁵ In its *Cambodia Digital Economy and Social Policy Framework 2022–2035*, the government reiterated its intention to develop 5G infrastructure. ¹⁶

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?

1/3

While internet service remains relatively expensive in Cambodia, it has become more affordable over time, though a gap in access remains between urban and rural areas. According to Cable, the average monthly cost of a fixed-line broadband subscription was \$28.13 in 2023, ¹⁷ while 1 gigabyte (GB) of mobile data cost \$0.42 on average in 2022. ¹⁸ These costs are expensive for many Cambodians, which had an estimated poverty rate of 15.2 percent in 2022 per the UN Development Programme. ¹⁹ In 2022, the monthly minimum wage was set at \$194 for workers in the formal economy. ²⁰ Some 85 percent of Cambodians work in the informal sector with no minimum wage or protections, often earning far less than the monthly minimum. ²¹ ISPs have sought to make their services more affordable, though the introduction of 5G services is expected to increase prices. ²²

Those living in urban areas are considerably more likely to have mobile internet access than those in rural areas. ²³ In December 2019, then prime minister Hun Sen met with the president of Axiata Group Berhad, the Malaysian firm that operates Smart Axiata, and called on the firm to expand services in rural regions, schools, libraries, and hospitals. ²⁴ Despite infrastructure improvements, the geographical digital divide led to rural Cambodians being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19-related remote-learning and -working policies. Some two million children living in the countryside were unable to access online education programs used for distance learning because they did not have access to smartphones or satellite dishes. ²⁵

A gender gap in internet usage persists in Cambodia. As of January 2023, women represented 45 percent of social media users but 50.5 percent of the population. ²⁶ In 2018, 52 percent of men owned a smartphone, representing 45 percent of internet users in the country, and 46 percent of women owned a smartphone, representing 30 percent of Cambodia's internet users. ²⁷

Internet use also varies based on education. In 2016, 27 percent of people with no formal education owned a smartphone; that figure stood at 82 percent for those with a university degree or studying at a university. ²⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the inequalities of smartphone ownership and internet access. ²⁹ A government study revealed that over 80 percent of students reported having no access to a smartphone or tablet and lacking sufficient internet bandwidth at home.

30 In December 2022, Chea Vandeth, who heads the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPTC), announced plans to launch 158 community technology centers across the country to benefit educators and students. **31**

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?

4/6

No government shutdowns of internet or mobile access have been documented in Cambodia, although broad provisions in the laws governing the telecommunications sector could provide the government with the power to do so.

In October 2019, Hun Sen instructed the MPTC to address the need for Cambodia to gain direct access to the international internet gateway without relying on Vietnam or Thailand, for national security reasons. **32** Three operators constitute Cambodia's backbone network: Telecom Cambodia, Viettel Cambodia, and CFOCN. **33** These operators interconnect with smaller networks, allowing exchanges of information through Wi-Fi, local area network (LAN) lines, or other means. Telecom Cambodia operates under the jurisdiction of the MPTC and the Ministry of Economy and Finance. **34**

In February 2022, the government announced a delay in the implementation of the highly controversial subdecree on the Establishment of the National Internet Gateway (NIG subdecree), which was adopted in February 2021 (see B3, C2, C5, and C6). **35** The NIG subdecree seeks to centralize the government's control over all incoming and outgoing domestic and international web traffic through a single internet gateway. The government-appointed NIG operators and regulatory authorities, specifically the MPTC and the Telecommunication Regulator Cambodia (TRC), were given monitoring powers. **36** The NIG subdecree was not implemented as of the end of the coverage period.

Civil society stakeholders have raised doubts regarding the government's capacity to implement its ambitious NIG at scale. **37**

Under Article 7 of the 2015 Law on Telecommunications, the MPTC or other relevant ministries have the authority to order telecommunications providers to “take necessary measures” in undefined circumstances of force majeure. The law separately established an enforcement body of “telecommunications inspection officials” to investigate alleged offenses under the law, with authority to call in support from the armed forces. ³⁸ Under the law, these officials can temporarily suspend telecommunications firms’ services and “suspend or fire their staff.” ³⁹

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?

4/6

There has been an increasing diversity of service providers in Cambodia, although some obstacles restricting entry into the market persist. The telecommunications market has become increasingly competitive since it opened to private investment in 2006. ⁴⁰ As of November 2022, there were 42 ISPs and 5 mobile service providers. ⁴¹

According to the TRC, Metfone, Smart, and Cellcard account for approximately 90 percent of mobile users. ⁴² During the coverage period, Metfone reported having 10 million mobile subscribers, ⁴³ Smart Axiata reported 8 million, ⁴⁴ and Cellcard reported 4 million. ⁴⁵

In October 2020, the MPTC suspended or revoked the licenses of 17 telecommunications operators for allegedly inaccurately reporting their revenue. ⁴⁶ In May 2021, the MPTC levied heavy tax penalties against Cambodian ISPs over purported miscalculation of tax revenues since 2017. Some of these penalties were projected to cost millions of dollars, resulting in deterred investment, higher prices for consumers, and the possible collapse of smaller firms. ⁴⁷ In February 2022, the MPTC and the TRC suspended the license of King Technologies, which operates the ISP Openet, and forbade them from signing up new customers over the company’s purported failure to pay \$6.6 million owed to the government. ⁴⁸

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?

0/4

Cambodia's regulatory body lacks independence, notably due to provisions contained in the 2015 Law on Telecommunications and the NIG subdecree.

The TRC is the main regulatory body for the telecommunications sector in Cambodia. Its objective is ostensibly to regulate the operations of telecommunications networks and services in order to “promote fair, efficient, and transparent competition” in Cambodia. ⁴⁹ Although the TRC proclaims itself to be an autonomous public entity, the Law on Telecommunications significantly undermined its independence by granting the MPTC ultimate authority over the regulator in a relationship that lacks transparency. ⁵⁰ The TRC's lack of independence was demonstrated in the blocks of several news sites ahead of the July 2023 election (see B1). ⁵¹

B. Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

4/6

News and other websites are periodically blocked in Cambodia, particularly those that disseminate information that could be perceived as a threat to the ruling government. The NIG increases the risk that more websites and content will be blocked in the future (see A3 and B3).

In July 2023, after the coverage period, the government ordered the blocking of the news outlets RFA and *Cambodia Daily* and the public information portal Kamnotra. The order came in the week before the general election, stating that the blocked outlets' reporting could “make confusion, affect the government's honor and prestige, and fail to govern the operating conditions of the Information Ministry.” ⁵²

In June 2023, after the coverage period, Hun Sen threatened to block Cambodians' access to Facebook and urged users to migrate to other platforms. ⁵³ The statements, issued ahead of the July 2023 elections, came after Meta's Oversight Board recommended that his Facebook and Instagram accounts be suspended for six months for using language that could incite violence. ⁵⁴

In February 2023, the TRC ordered ISPs to block the English- and Khmer-language news sites belonging to VOD. The blocks came after Hun Sen ordered the revocation of the license of VOD's parent organization (see B2 and B6). ⁵⁵ The websites remained inactive at the end of the coverage period for some users. ⁵⁶ News outlets perceived as less critical of the government were not blocked ahead of the July 2023 elections. Ahead of the 2018 polls, the government similarly ordered the temporary blocking of 17 websites, including the *Phnom Penh Post*, Voice of America (VOA), and VOD for 48 hours. ⁵⁷

In the immediate wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cambodian government reportedly blocked access to news sites. In March 2020, Monoroom.info, a Khmer-language news site based in France, was blocked after it published numerous articles on the impact of the coronavirus in Cambodia. ⁵⁸ The site was accessible as of April 2021. ⁵⁹ The TRC blocked two websites owned by news outlet TVFB in April 2020 after the outlet's media license was cancelled and its editor was arrested (see B2); ⁶⁰ the websites appeared to be inactive at the end of the coverage period.

Websites hosting pornography or sexually explicit images are subject to blocking in Cambodia under the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation. ⁶¹ The government banned online gambling in 2019, citing concerns that the industry was being used for criminal extortion. ⁶² The TRC blocked 79 online gambling websites in November 2021 and 123 such websites in January 2022. ⁶³

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter were freely available during the coverage period. ⁶⁴

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

1/4

The amount of online content removed at the behest of state or nonstate actors remains difficult to assess, as the process is unofficial and nontransparent. Content was removed following government pressure or user complaints during the coverage period, and the government revoked the licenses of online media outlets in apparent retaliation for their content (see B6).

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, “fake news” allegations became the standard for cracking down on dissent or criticism of the government. In July 2022, the Ministry of Information’s Fake News Monitoring Committee said it had investigated 1,376 cases in the first half of the year. ⁶⁵ The committee reportedly responds to reports by warning people of misconduct, filing lawsuits, revoking or suspending media licenses, and seeking to restrict content or accounts responsible.

⁶⁶ In December 2021, the committee announced that it had recorded 1,938 instances that year, including 1,023 that it said were meant to provoke criticism of the government, 809 cases of insults to King Norodom Sihamoni and political leaders, and 106 deemed to cause social chaos. Most of this content was posted to social platforms. ⁶⁷ The government reported documenting 1,343 cases of purportedly false or “objectionable” news from social media posts throughout all of 2020. ⁶⁸

The government regularly revokes the licenses of online news outlets following their reporting, sometimes also requiring the news sites to remove online content (see B6). In February 2023, the government revoked the media operating license of VOD’s parent organization, the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM), effectively shutting down VOD—one of the country’s last independent news outlets—and blocking its website over its reporting on Hun Manet’s role in the government. Before the website was blocked (see B1), the platform publicly apologized and removed the article. ⁶⁹ In April 2021, the Ministry of Information similarly revoked the media license of online news outlet Ko1 TV after it posted several videos that

allegedly criticized the government’s coronavirus response. Hun Sen asked the outlet to delete the videos and forced the publishers to issue an apology. **70**

In March 2023, the government threatened legal action against CamboJa News if it did not correct alleged misrepresentations in their reporting on the government’s revocation of three Khmer-language news outlets’ licenses earlier that month (see B6). CamboJa News modified the article in response. **71**

Arresting and subsequently forcing individuals to make public apologies in lieu of criminal charges is a common tactic the government uses in response to dissent or opinions it considers unfavorable. For instance, in June 2022, the Phnom Penh Municipal Police summoned a Facebook user after he posted allegedly false information about the police. The police forced him to apologize publicly for “damaging the honor of the police” and retract the post. **72** In September 2021, a TikTok user was arrested and forced to film a videotaped apology for allegedly insulting traffic police in Phnom Penh in a video that has since been removed. **73**

The Cambodian authorities also regularly attempt to prevent content from being published online by threatening anyone who takes pictures or videos of incidents to raise awareness of government wrongdoing or human rights abuses. **74** In January 2023, authorities questioned CSOs for posting of the music video of “Workers Blood,” a song performed by rapper Kea Sokun marking the nine-year anniversary of deadly police crackdown on a peaceful garment worker protest in Phnom Penh. **75** Authorities alleged the video contributed to social disorder and threatened legal action against the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) if it was not deleted. At least three CSOs, including LICADHO, removed the video from social media to avoid legal action. **76** Sou Senghak of Samarakot News was physically assaulted by an army officer in the district of Choam Ksan, after observing the possibly illegal transportation of timber; the journalist then filed a complaint with authorities. Both parties agreed to resolve the matter out of court, averting a lawsuit, in August 2022; as part of that agreement, the news outlet retracted a story on the incident. **77**

The government’s restrictions on internet content lack transparency, are vaguely defined, and lack adequate judicial oversight. The MPTC can order ISPs to block websites at the request of other government departments. Implementation of censorship is nontransparent, apparently based on informal communications between government officials and service providers. There is limited avenue for appeal.

The NIG subdecree, adopted in February 2021, grants the government sweeping powers to restrict and block access to digital content (see A3). NIG operators are obligated to collaborate with the MPTC to block or disconnect network connections that affect “safety, social order, dignity, culture, or traditions.” If NIG operators or ISPs fail to comply with these broad conditions, they could incur a range of steep financial penalties and even have their licenses suspended or revoked. **78** Although the implementation of the infrastructure for the NIG was delayed, the government still underscores its plans to move forward with its installation (see A3).

In February 2020, the Ministry of Information confirmed that a government “commission” monitors Cambodian media, including social media platforms. The commission operates under the legal authorization of a May 2018 interministerial *Prakas* (Proclamation) on Website and Social Media Control. If the commission deems online content to be unfit for publication or to contain false information, it will either force the publisher to remove the post or take legal action.

The government underscored its commitment to tightening its media-licensing regime during the coverage period. In September 2022, the Ministry of Information announced that it will apply greater scrutiny to online publications’ journalistic ethics, dissemination of information that is considered false, and organizational structure and scale when issuing media licenses. **79** Several news outlets have already had licenses revoked (see B2).

In September 2022, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) announced plans to develop social media code of ethics to curb the posting of “provocative” and “immoral” images and videos by online users, particularly women. MoWA intends to partner with the MPTC to curb content violating the code of conduct. ⁸⁰ MoWA’s plans for implementation were not released by the end of the coverage period.

In August 2019, the government threatened to revoke the licenses of or shut down online news outlets purportedly spreading false information that threatened national security. ⁸¹ Those that the government deems violate their license conditions can be ordered to remove offending content or post corrections.

In April 2020, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts created the Disciplinary and Accolade Council to track “illicit content” online. ⁸²

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?

1 / 4

Self-censorship online among journalists, activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), unionists, and ordinary users is widespread and has reportedly increased in recent years. A clampdown on civil society has created an environment in which NGOs have increasingly self-censored, restricted, or even completely ceased their activities online.

A poll of journalists and media outlets conducted by the CCIM and released in March 2022 noted that journalists fear reporting on sensitive issues because of repressive laws and regulations (see B5 and C2). The poll found that 72 percent of respondents are concerned with reporting on political issues, 64 percent are concerned about reporting on human rights abuses, and 61 percent are concerned about reporting on impunity cases. ⁸³ Additionally, 64 percent of respondents reported that they practiced self-censorship due to the political environment. ⁸⁴ Journalists have avoided reporting on sensitive issues including Hun Sen and his family, land disputes, corruption, drug trafficking, and political issues due to legal action, harassment, and intimidation by authorities (see C3 and C7). ⁸⁵

The government’s continued repression of dissenting voices and focus on the spread of purportedly false news ⁸⁶ were accompanied by an increase in online surveillance, as well as a rise in prosecutions linked to online speech. Arrests under COVID-19 legislation exacerbated Cambodians’ fears for their safety if they expressed opinions about the pandemic online (see C3). ⁸⁷ These factors have contributed to increased self-censorship. According to a 2021 survey conducted by the Cambodia Fundamental Freedoms Monitor Project (FFMP), only 47 percent of respondents felt free to speak on social media.” ⁸⁸ Additionally, 36 percent of NGOs and trade union leaders polled felt unsafe sharing information through social media. ⁸⁹ One-tenth of respondents reported they “always” avoided saying what they wanted to in public or online for fear of retaliation and 17 percent stated they “regularly” felt like they need to self-censor. ⁹⁰

B5 0-4 pts	
Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?	2/4

The spread of disinformation and misinformation has been a growing concern in recent years. A 2020 report from the Oxford Internet Institute noted the presence of coordinated cybertroop teams that manipulate information on social media on behalf of government agencies, politicians and parties, and citizens and influencers. ⁹¹ The teams work to support progovernment messaging, attack the opposition, and spread disinformation.

In July 2023, RFA reported that the CPP’s Cyber War Room, operated by Hun Manet, was coordinating pro-CPP disinformation on social media ahead of that month’s elections. The War Room leaders allegedly ordered supporters and government officials to post Facebook messages attacking CSOs and independent media outlets critical of the government. ⁹²

In December 2021, when over 1,000 union members began their weekslong protest after losing employment with the prominent casino company Nagaworld, suspicious Facebook accounts surfaced and were used to accuse the protesters of staging a

“color revolution” and of having foreign influence. One of the Facebook accounts, known as “Brave Women Volunteers,” had only 100 friends and a single post from the day before the accusations were disseminated. These claims were also shared by progovernment media outlets and an Interior Ministry official. ⁹³ The day after the Facebook posts surfaced, the Brave Women Volunteers account disappeared. ⁹⁴

Hun Sen, who has more than 10 million followers on Facebook, has been accused of manipulating his page to create an exaggerated perception of his popularity. ⁹⁵ The *Phnom Penh Post* alleged that only 20 percent of Hun Sen’s new “likes” in February and March 2016 came from within Cambodia. The rest reportedly came from “click farms” based abroad, in which low-paid workers were employed to like his page. ⁹⁶

The owner of the *Phnom Penh Post*, a Malaysian businessman, has reportedly interfered with the paper’s editorial independence by demanding the removal of an article detailing his links to the Cambodian government from its website. The incident compelled 13 journalists and editors to resign and led to the firing of the paper’s chief editor in 2018. ⁹⁷

The government has also conducted disinformation campaigns against the CNRP. In November 2019, for example, online news outlet Coda Story reported that opposition supporters were forced to make videos “confessing” that they helped Sam Rainsy, the party’s former leader, attempt to return from self-imposed exile. ⁹⁸ In at least one case, a video was shared by progovernment news outlet Fresh News to its Facebook page.

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online?

2/3

Although economic and regulatory constraints generally do not prevent the publication of online content, a number of media outlets with an online presence have shut down due to high taxes. Separately, online outlets are required to obtain licenses, and four of these licenses were revoked due to the outlets’ reporting during the coverage period, which led to some removals of content (see B2).

The government regularly revokes the licenses of online news outlets following their reporting. In February 2023, the Ministry of Information revoked the media operating license of VOD’s parent company for allegedly violating journalistic ethics (see B2).

99 The government’s highly politicized decision was strongly condemned by domestic and international CSOs. **100**

Similarly, in March 2023, the Ministry of Information revoked the media licenses of three Khmer language media outlets—Federation of Cambodia–ASEAN Journalists, Raksmeay Kampong Cham, and Dumming Knonh Srok—for alleged ethics violations in reporting related to a senior government official’s role in land fraud. **101**

During the previous coverage period, the Ministry of Information revoked the media licenses of three news outlets that primarily operated online, the Bayong Times, KCTV, and Cambodia Today, following reporting on government corruption. **102**

Between September 2020 and August 2021, the Ministry of Information revoked seven media licenses. **103** In March 2021, two online news outlets, Youth Techo and Stoeng Charl, had their licenses revoked because the government claimed they had spread false information that would cause social unrest. **104** A Ministry of Information employee also had his media license revoked after he uploaded a picture on his Facebook page of what he erroneously thought was a body of a deceased COVID-19 patient. He took the post down but was later fired. **105** Also in March 2021, a popular social media publisher lost his media license after posting a video exposing monks in Siem Reap physically beating junior monks. **106**

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability?

2/4

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because the revocation of the media licenses of four news publications, including that of Voice of Democracy, marked a significant decline in the availability of independent news.

The diversity of the online environment is undermined by the government’s censorship of critical voices and independence media. Authorities shut down radio

stations and newspapers in 2017 and during the run-up to the 2018 and 2023 elections. The internet has become one of the main sources of news and information for Cambodians, and social media has allowed the proliferation of more diverse content that is free from government influence. ¹⁰⁷ Many Cambodians turn to Facebook, RFA, VOA, VOD (before its license revocation), and CamboJa News as key news sources. The *Southeast Asia Globe* and *ASEAN Today* are also independent news sources based in Cambodia. ¹⁰⁸

As of July 2023, VOD’s Khmer news site had more than 1.8 million followers on Facebook. ¹⁰⁹ RFA’s Khmer-language Facebook page had more than 7.5 million followers, ¹¹⁰ and VOA Khmer had more than 7.8 million, ¹¹¹ making them some of Cambodia’s most-visited Facebook pages. ¹¹² In contrast, Fresh News, an outlet closely associated with the government, had over 4.4 million followers. ¹¹³ Similarly, the Khmer-language Facebook pages of the progovernment Khmer Times ¹¹⁴ and *Phnom Penh Post* ¹¹⁵ respectively had 38,000 and 128,000 followers.

However, the limited number of independent media outlets remaining has affected the diversity of content online, and has increased self-censorship (see B1, B4, and B6). ¹¹⁶ Media ownership is highly concentrated, and several major media outlets are affiliated with the ruling CPP. Ahead of the July 2023 general election, the information environment was further constrained. In February and March 2023, the government revoked the licenses of the CCIM and three Khmer-language news sites (see B6). In July 2023, after the coverage period, the websites and social media pages of RFA were temporarily blocked by some providers (see B1). ¹¹⁷

In the leadup to the July 2023 polls, misinformation related to Hun Sen and Hun Manet spread online. ¹¹⁸ The presence of misinformation in Cambodia likely acutely impacts Indigenous communities, in part due to limited digital literacy and a lack of reliable information in Indigenous languages. ¹¹⁹

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?

4/6

Amid heightened restrictions on freedom of assembly, communities, CSOs, and activists have turned to petition websites and social media, particularly Facebook, as platforms for advocacy and to organize assemblies. However, repressive laws, arrests, prosecutions, and increased harassment around digital campaigns have undermined the use of the internet for mobilization (see C2, C3, and C7).

The government's monitoring of social media and frequent arrests of users for their online political activity have impeded Cambodians' ability to mobilize and campaign on political issues (see C3 and C5). During the previous coverage period, in September 2021, Hun Sen tapped into a private Zoom call between former CNRP leaders, many of whom live in exile, to warn them that he had been monitoring them and to warn them against continuing their “disruptive activities.” He then stated that approximately 20 of their phone calls had been tapped. ¹²⁰ In October 2020, authorities threatened at least six journalists reporting on protests coinciding with the anniversary of the Paris Peace Agreements, which marked the end of the civil war; the journalists were told to stop shooting live footage and to surrender their phones and cameras. ¹²¹

Users have mobilized through social media and online petitions to draw attention to issues including the electoral process, environmental justice, and gender equality. In August 2022, Cambodians expressed outrage on Facebook around the large-scale deforestation of Phnom Tamao forest. ¹²² Hun Sen subsequently canceled land-development permits and ordered a reforestation of the area, citing requests from government officials. ¹²³ CSOs have used online petitions to call on the government to protect women's rights to assemble and to refrain from violently responding to their involvement in demonstrations, including through the use of sexual harassment. ¹²⁴

Throughout the coverage period, CSOs drafted several joint statements, open letters, and recommendations to the government on a range of issues, including the revocation of VOD's license, ¹²⁵ gender-based violence against women journalists, ¹²⁶ and freedom of expression more broadly. ¹²⁷

C. Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

1/6

Although some articles in the constitution guarantee freedom of expression, constitutional amendments passed in 2018 undermine these rights, and the legal framework imposes significant restrictions on press freedom and freedom of expression, including online. ¹²⁸

Amendments to the constitution and the criminal code ¹²⁹ adopted in February 2018 restrict fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression online. ¹³⁰ In particular, amendments to Articles 42 and 49 of the constitution state that individuals and political parties should only conduct activities that uphold Cambodia’s “national interest.” ¹³¹ The broad, vague wording of the amendments leaves them open to abuse, as any legitimate online discourse could be deemed unconstitutional if it ostensibly impacts the national interest.

In April 2020, the government passed the Law on the Management of the Nation in a State of Emergency to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This law empowers the government to monitor information online, ban or restrict news and media sharing, and implement other measures it deems necessary. ¹³²

A 2019 draft Law on Access to Information ¹³³ contained protections for whistleblowers and had the potential to positively impact free expression online if approved and enforced. However, an updated draft released in August 2019 raised concerns about the law’s adherence to international human rights standards, ¹³⁴ as well as its use of broad and unclear standards that could threaten access of information and freedom of expression. ¹³⁵ For example, the law narrowly defines the type of information and institutions it applies to; lacks effective oversight procedures; permits public authorities to deny disclosure in various overly broad situations; and contains a criminal libel and defamation provision. ¹³⁶ While the law was reportedly

in the final review stage in November 2021, ¹³⁷ the government announced in January 2023 that it would be adopted within two years of the July polls. ¹³⁸

In January 2021, the General Commissariat of the National Police issued a directive barring journalists from filming, recording, or livestreaming ongoing police investigations and other duties performed by the police. ¹³⁹ If journalists are found to be in violation of this decree, authorities can take legal action against them under the Press Law. Three days before this directive was established, the information minister threatened journalists who took photos and covered news related to authorities in “prohibited areas.” ¹⁴⁰ The new directive is vaguely worded and open to broad interpretation, whereby journalists could be arrested for undertaking legitimate reporting and investigative activities.

Other directives have been presented in provinces outside of Phnom Penh. In November 2021, Kampot governor Mao Thonin ordered the provincial information department to increase its monitoring of journalists. Journalists were also required to report to that department before reporting on issues within Kampot. Following public outcry, the information minister called the directive “wrong” and warned that it may violate Article 40 of the constitution. ¹⁴¹

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

1/4

While free-expression protections are enshrined in the constitution, expression is nonetheless threatened by provisions of Cambodian law, notably under parts of the criminal code. ¹⁴²

Recently passed laws and pending legislation impose a range of civil liability and criminal penalties. The NIG subdecree—which has yet to be implemented as of May 2023 (see A3)—imposes hefty financial penalties and media license suspension on NIG operators or ISPs who fail to comply with any of the stipulated provisions (see A3 and B3). Fines range from 50 million (\$12,220) to 100 million riels (\$24,440) for

individuals, and from 500 million (\$122,200) to one billion riels (\$244,400) for legal entities. The NIG subdecree also includes a vague catch-all penalty clause, which subjects any natural or legal person to punishment under “applicable laws” for committing offenses that “affect national security, social order, or national revenue.”

143 While the final version of the NIG subdecree added a judicial appeal process, CSOs have noted that the Cambodian judiciary lacks independence. **144**

In August 2020, the government released the draft Law on Public Order, which restricts freedom of expression online by prohibiting the use of writing, images, and other content on social media that endangers national tradition and dignity. **145** The draft law targets women and LGBT+ people by criminalizing wearing clothes that are “too short” or “revealing” in public spaces, including online spaces. Individuals can be fined 100,000 (\$24) to 500,000 riels (\$122) and imprisoned from one to six days for engaging in prohibited activities. **146** The bill had not been passed by the end of the coverage period.

The government’s revised draft Law on Cybercrime—which an August 2020 leak revealed had been heavily revised and broadened in scope—raised alarm from rights groups for its potential to intensify the government’s crackdown on free expression (see C6). **147** While the draft law outlaws a few genuine issues such as child sexual abuse imagery, Article 45 permits authorities to fine or imprison persons if they knowingly make or spread a “false statement or disinformation through information technology,” potentially justifying arrests for allegedly false information about national security, public health or safety, relations between Cambodia and other countries, the outcome of a national election, public confidence in the functioning of the government, or other sensitive political issues. **148** If passed, the law would impose a prison sentence of two to three years and a fine from 4 million (\$950) to 10 million riels (\$2,380) for those allegedly spreading disinformation, **149** and a one- to six-month prison sentence and a fine of 100,000 (\$24) to one million riels (\$237) for defamation offenses, online or offline (see C1). **150** As of September 2022, the draft was reportedly nearly final. **151**

Under Article 495 of the criminal code, individuals can be arrested for incitement to disturb public order or affecting the dignity of individuals and public officials—a

broadly worded provision that can be used to prosecute online critics of the government. ¹⁵² Articles 305 and 307, ¹⁵³ which govern defamation and public insult respectively, are frequently used against those engaged in online discourse. Under the criminal code, individuals can also be prosecuted in connection with written documents or pictures that are released online unintentionally or without their consent. ¹⁵⁴ Those convicted for defamation or public insult can be fined up to \$2,500. ¹⁵⁵ Defamation by media outlets, which is covered in the 1995 Press Law, is punishable with a fine of between \$250 to \$1,200, and outlets convicted must publish a retraction. ¹⁵⁶ People can face prison time in connection with online expression under a variety of criminal charges including forgery, which carries a penalty of up to 10 years' imprisonment, and incitement to disturb social security or discriminate against a person or group, punishable by up to two and three years in prison, respectively. ¹⁵⁷

A 2018 amendment to the criminal code introduced a *lèse-majesté* offense (Article 437) that criminalizes defamation of, insults of, and threats against the king. The crime is punishable by between one and five years in prison and a fine of \$500 to \$2,500. It also applies to media outlets carrying allegedly insulting content.

The 2015 Law on Telecommunications further increased government control over the information and communication technologies (ICT) sector and threatened the rights to privacy and freedom of expression. Using telecommunications to plan criminal activity or damage property can result in a prison sentence of up to six months and fines of up to \$8,800. Article 80 punishes the “establishment, installation, and utilization of equipment in the telecommunications sector” leading to “national insecurity” with 7 to 15 years in prison.

The 2015 Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations (LANGO) contains provisions—including Article 24, which requires CSOs to act neutrally toward political parties—that have the potential to restrict freedom of expression, including online.

Article 1 of the current Press Law “assures freedom of the press and freedom of publication in conformity with Articles 31 and 41 of the constitution,” but the law does

not explicitly cover online media. The law also allows civil action against broadly defined activities; for example, it restricts content that does not promote “the good custom of society” under Article 14, ¹⁵⁸ violations of which can incur a fine of between \$250 to \$1,200. ¹⁵⁹

In December 2020, the government announced that updates to the Press Law were being drafted, though they were not released as of the end of the coverage period. ¹⁶⁰

The government has signaled its intent to legislate so-called fake news. ¹⁶¹ In March 2019, Hun Sen called on relevant ministries to consider drafting a law. ¹⁶² Later that year, the Ministry of Information began research to inform new policies related to the dissemination of false news. ¹⁶³

Different articles of the criminal code include charges for “plotting,” “defamation,” “falsifying information,” and “incitement to commit a felony”. ¹⁶⁴

Article 11 of the March 2021 Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 and other Severe and Dangerous Contagious Diseases ¹⁶⁵ imposes a prison sentence of up to five years and a fine of up to 20 million riels (\$4,760) for “intentionally obstructing” the implementation of COVID-19 measures. Though Article 11 does not explicitly restrict online freedoms, authorities have used this provision to target and silence online speech relating to COVID-19 and vaccines (see C3). ¹⁶⁶

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

2/6

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because extreme prison sentences were not imposed against internet users during the coverage period, though people still faced arrest for their online activities, and mass trials against opposition figures continued.

Prosecutions for online speech continued as the government targeted dissenting voices in the political opposition and among the general public, as well as human

rights defenders and journalists. ¹⁶⁷ Individuals faced several charges, including defamation, insult of a public official, and incitement to commit a felony. ¹⁶⁸

Authorities continued to arrest and prosecute former CNRP members en masse for their online activities. Following the politicized conviction of Kem Sokha, the primary opposition candidate to current premier Hun Manet, in March 2023, ¹⁶⁹ authorities arrested opposition figures Yim Sinorn and Hun Kosal for Facebook comments critiquing the government. Yim Sinorn was released after posting a public apology video and later joined the ruling CPP; Hun Kosal reportedly remained in custody at the end of the coverage period. ¹⁷⁰ In February 2023, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court upheld the 18-month prison sentence of former CNRP official Kem Tola for Facebook comments critiquing the government in 2019. ¹⁷¹ In December 2022, 36 former opposition members received sentences from the Phnom Penh Municipal Court for plotting against the government; their convictions were based in part on their Facebook posts. ¹⁷² Of the four members who were in Cambodia, three received five-year sentences. ¹⁷³ Members tried in absentia faced up to seven years in prison, while former CNRP member Heng Sokleng was released on bail. In a June 2022 trial, 50 people received five-to-eight-year terms; the trial reportedly dealt with social media comments critical of the government. ¹⁷⁴ In October 2022, Sam Rainsy received a life term in absentia for allegedly ceding territory to a foreign entity. ¹⁷⁵ In March 2022, during the previous coverage period, a court convicted 20 CNRP members over their opposition activism, including criticism of the government posted on social media. Twelve of those sentenced were already detained and sentenced to five years' imprisonment; seven were in exile and sentenced in absentia to 10 years in prison. ¹⁷⁶

Individuals are also subjected to criminal procedures when denouncing violations of free and fair election principles, corruption, and irregularities on the part of officials. In December 2022, the Phnom Penh Appeal Court upheld the Phnom Penh Municipal Court's conviction against Son Chhay, a member of the opposition Candlelight Party who was found guilty defaming the CPP and the National Election Committee. Son Chhay had discussed alleged fraud that marred the June 2022 commune elections with *Cambodia Daily*. ¹⁷⁷ The Appeal Court ordered Son Chhay to pay \$1 million in damages. Days after the appeal was decided, Hun Sen warned that those defaming

the ruling party would be sued, stating that the lawsuit against Son Chhay was meant to deter others. **178**

Internet users have faced arrests and convictions for their online activity. For example, in November 2021, a 16-year-old boy with autism—who is the son of detained CNRP official Kak Komphear—was arrested and convicted for criticizing government leaders through a voice message in a Telegram group. **179** His sentence, including an eight-month prison term, was upheld by the Phnom Penh Appeal Court in March 2022. **180**

Authorities have previously targeted internet users for sharing allegedly false information related to the coronavirus pandemic and the government's response. In February 2022, during the previous coverage period, CNRP activist Voeurn Veasna was sentenced to a year in prison for incitement over Facebook posts in which he criticized the government's pandemic response and said Hun Sen sought to appoint his son as his successor. **181**

Journalists across Cambodia continued to be arrested or harassed for their online reporting. In August 2022, five VOD journalists, one of whom was physically assaulted (see C7), were detained for seven hours while reporting on deforestation at Phnom Tamao (see B8). Authorities claimed the reporters had entered a prohibited area; other journalists in recent weeks had freely reported on the situation. **182** In July 2022, an appeals court upheld a provincial court's sentencing of journalist Kao Piseth for accusing Hun Sen of corruption and questioning Sinopharm coronavirus vaccines in a December 2021 Facebook post. Kao Piseth received a two-year prison sentence and a 3-million-riel (\$713) fine. **183**

Authorities continue to charge users under the *lèse-majesté* amendment of 2018 to Article 437 of the criminal code. In February 2023, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court upheld the in absentia 18-month conviction against CNRP official Kem Tola over a series of social media comments against the government and the king; Tola was convicted of incitement to overthrow the government. **184** In January 2023, Hun Sen called for a police investigation and detention of a Facebook user who criticized him on a picture of an official trip to the Maldives. **185** In March 2023, opposition activists

Yim Sinorn and Hun Kosal were placed in detention in Prey Sar prison on charges of insulting the king and inciting serious social unrest. The charges are connected with social media posts about the relative positions of Hun Sen and the monarch at the SEA Games torch-lighting ceremony at Angkor Wat. ¹⁸⁶

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?

3/4

Encryption technology is freely available. There are some limits on anonymous communication.

The 2015 Regulation on Cell Phone Data threatens suspensions and fines for mobile service providers who do not register the identities of customers. ¹⁸⁷ The regulation obliges companies to supply police with identification details of SIM card holders on request. ¹⁸⁸ In August 2022, the MPTC issued a final warning to mobile service providers to stop selling unregistered SIM cards by January 2023. ¹⁸⁹ As of May 2022, Cambodia recorded over 19 million registered SIM cards. The authorities have cracked down on retailers who failed to register SIM card owners since 2017. ¹⁹⁰ In 2016, a TRC spokesman said that the government would monitor telecommunications operators' databases to prevent unregistered SIM cards from being distributed that year. ¹⁹¹ According to the TRC, the stricter implementation of the regulation led to a decrease in the number of mobile subscribers between 2016 and 2018. ¹⁹²

Responding to heightened surveillance, Cambodians have increasingly turned to encrypted applications such as WhatsApp to communicate. Government officials also increasingly use encrypted applications. ¹⁹³ However, under the NIG subdecree (see A3), ISPs will be required to make users complete online forms with accurate, identifiable information, including names and birthdates, thus undermining anonymous communication. ¹⁹⁴

C5 0-6 pts

The government monitors residents' publicly visible activity online and extralegally surveils private communications, despite the existence of some legal safeguards.

Article 97 of the 2015 Law on Telecommunications criminalizes eavesdropping by private individuals but permits secret surveillance with approval from an undefined "legitimate authority." The law includes no legal or procedural safeguards and appears to authorize undeclared monitoring of "any private speech via telecommunications." ¹⁹⁵ The passing of the NIG subdecree allows for the government's unfettered surveillance of individuals' online activity, but the extent to which this law will be implemented is not yet known (see A3 and B3).

Under the September 2022 draft of the proposed Cybersecurity Law, authorities can seize computer systems and access user data in response to suspected threats or incidents that could cause "significant harm" to "national security, national defense, foreign relations, the economy, public health, safety or public order." ¹⁹⁶ The draft outlines the penalties for those who fail to comply with the provisions as up to one year of imprisonment and a fine of 150 million riels (\$35,670). The draft remains under stakeholder review as of the end of the coverage period. ¹⁹⁷

Private communications have been monitored and published online to discredit public figures in recent years. While members of the ruling CPP have been targeted, individuals affiliated with the CNRP have more often been affected. For example, in October 2017, the progovernment online media outlet Fresh News published purported leaks of CNRP lawmakers' private conversations; Fresh News obtained the messages from the Sei Ha Facebook page, an anonymous page often accused of being a vehicle for government propaganda. ¹⁹⁸

Monitoring of CNRP members' private communications continued during the coverage period. In December 2022, authorities relied in part on recordings of private phone calls to prosecute 36 former CNRP leaders and members in a mass trial (see C3). ¹⁹⁹ In December 2020, former CNRP activist Kong Mas was arrested in

connection with the mass trial of CNRP officials on “plotting” charges. The authorities confiscated his cell phone. Later, he discovered his Facebook passwords were changed and his account had been hacked. The hackers used his account to send messages to other CNRP members in an apparent attempt to manipulate recipients of the messages into incriminating themselves. ²⁰⁰

In 2019, the National Police announced they were monitoring the social media activity of CNRP supporters ahead of Sam Rainsy’s expected return to Cambodia, while the Ministry of Interior confirmed the government was monitoring phone communications between Rainsy and his supporters. ²⁰¹ In September 2019, two CNRP members, Sun Bunthon and Nou Phoeun, were questioned by police; officials addressed the transcript of their private phone conversation, which focused on Cambodia’s political situation and Rainsy’s expected return, during questioning. ²⁰² In January 2018, amid claims of illicit affairs allegedly involving high-ranking government officials, Hun Sen implied that the government could access private phone records. ²⁰³

In recent years, authorities have stated on numerous occasions that they were monitoring online content. ²⁰⁴ In 2017, the National Police announced that it was monitoring Facebook to detect and deter “rebel movements against the government.” ²⁰⁵ The ruling CPP’s five-year strategic plan, adopted in January 2018, strongly emphasizes the need for increased surveillance. ²⁰⁶ The 2018 interministerial Prakas on Website and Social Media Control gives extensive surveillance powers to the government and mandates that the MPTC, the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Interior form a special unit to effectively “police” social media, ostensibly to fight against purportedly false news (see B3). ²⁰⁷ In October 2019, the Ministry of Interior’s information technology department announced plans to create a Security Operation Center, which it said would monitor online threats on all digital platforms. ²⁰⁸ In January 2021, the Ministry of Information announced its intention to increase monitoring of TikTok and private communications platforms, including WhatsApp, Telegram, and Messenger. ²⁰⁹ As a result of this increased monitoring, the government has targeted individuals for their speech on Telegram and a Ministry of Labor government official was fired for

spreading “fake news” via Telegram voice messages about the number of COVID-19 infections in Cambodia. ²¹⁰

In September 2021, the Ministry of Interior and Chinese law enforcement officials agreed to form an “anti-crime plan” whereby Beijing would provide the National Police with equipment, including biometric surveillance technology. ²¹¹ This has led to fears that the surveillance technology could be used against dissidents or those perceived critical of the Cambodian government. These concerns were reiterated by Cambodian labor activists who claimed that their online and offline activities were being tracked by authorities employing Chinese surveillance technology. A government official denied this claim. ²¹²

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users’ right to privacy?

1/6

Service providers are required to provide communication information to the government, though this process lacks judicial oversight. Article 6 of the 2015 Law on Telecommunications mandates that all telecommunications operators provide ICT service data to the MPTC. ²¹³ There is no requirement for a judicial warrant or other safeguards, and the law places no limits on how long data can be stored. ²¹⁴

The NIG subdecree contains a catch-all clause requiring NIG operators to maintain technical records, lists of internet protocol (IP) addresses, and internet traffic records (see A3, B3, and C2). Under this clause, bulk data must be collected and maintained with no clear purpose. ²¹⁵ One source reported that ISPs are struggling to identify affordable options for storing the bulk data required by the subdecree. ²¹⁶

The draft Law on Cybercrime obliges all ISPs to retain and maintain the data of internet users for a minimum of 180 days and obliges ISPs to provide the user-identifiable data upon request from the competent authorities (see C2). ²¹⁷

The interministerial Prakas on Website and Social Media Control also obliges ISPs to “install software programs and equip internet surveillance tools to easily filter and block any social media accounts or pages” deemed illegal. ²¹⁸ The Prakas does not

provide for any right to challenge a decision taken pursuant to its mandates, nor does it provide for judicial recourse for users whose rights are negatively affected by its implementation. ²¹⁹ There were no updates on its implementation during the coverage period.

In June 2021, the Asia Times reported that Chinese government officials had sought access to the personal data collected by Cambodia’s “Stop COVID-19” contact tracing system. ²²⁰ The MPTC and the Health Ministry denied the outlet’s reporting. ²²¹ The allegations highlighted the lack of privacy safeguards in the system. ²²²

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities?

2/5

Journalists, activists, and individuals face increasing harassment, smear campaigns, and violence in Cambodia, including at times instigated by state officials. A threat-assessment survey conducted by the CCIM in 2022 found that 39 percent of surveyed journalists reported being verbally attacked or physically assaulted while carrying out their duties, while 56 percent said they had experienced legal harassment resulting from their work. ²²³

Physical attacks against online journalists and activists were also reported during the coverage period. In January 2023, the editor in chief of BTN Media was reportedly pushed into a canal by a military officer who owned a sand-dredging site; the journalist was reporting on the impact of sand dredging on nearby rice fields. ²²⁴ In August 2022, a VOD video journalist was slapped in the face and had his phone taken by an officer after recording the detention of his colleagues (see C3). The journalists were reporting on the Phnom Tamao forest clearing (see B8). ²²⁵ The Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CJAA) reported that in August 2022, the car of a Penh Chet Media journalist was shot by an unknown assailant after the journalist published an article on illegal cockfighting; the journalist alleged that authorities may have been involved in the activity. ²²⁶

RFA reported that CPP supporters and government officials were encouraged by Hun Manet’s Cyber War Room to harass CSOs and critical media outlets via social media ahead of the July 2023 elections (see B5). ²²⁷ In a June 2023 Facebook livestream, after the coverage period, Hun Sen threatened political opponents with violence, stating that he would “gather CPP people to protest and beat you up” and send “gangsters to [your] house” if they did not choose the “legal system.” Meta’s Oversight Board subsequently recommended Hun Sen’s accounts be temporarily suspended in part for his amplification of violent threats (see A3). ²²⁸

Online harassment is increasingly common in Cambodia. A November 2021 survey of 700 Cambodian internet users found that 38 percent reported experiencing online harassment, with LGBT+ people and women more likely to be sexually harassed. ²²⁹ In February 2023, Hun Sen criticized a civil society coalition after it released a joint statement condemning a social media creator’s online sexual harassment of a woman VOD reporter. ²³⁰

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?

2/3

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to a lack of reported cyberattacks against civil society groups, human rights defenders, and media outlets during the coverage period.

Government bodies, private entities, and government officials were subject to technical attacks during the coverage period. The social media accounts of activists, human rights organizations, and media outlets have been reportedly hacked in recent years. ²³¹ Though the human rights organization LICADHO reported that its website was briefly defaced by a hacker in August 2022, no serious attacks were publicly reported during the coverage period. ²³²

In May 2023, the website of Cambodia Angkor Air faced a distributed-denial-of-service (DDoS) attack, temporarily halting its online services. ²³³ In April 2023, the

official Facebook page of Deputy Prime Minister Men Sam An was temporarily overtaken by an anonymous hacker. ²³⁴ The Facebook page of Poipet City governor Keat Hul was overtaken the same month, reportedly by a Vietnamese clothing store. ²³⁵

There are also reports of hacking attempts by actors abroad. In November 2022, a group known as “Dark Pink” launched a malware and phishing attack against the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Targets in other countries also faced cyberattacks. ²³⁶ In May 2021, the US Justice Department indicted four Chinese hackers with cyberespionage for targeting Cambodian government ministries in 2018. ²³⁷

...

Footnotes

- ¹ Simon Kemp, “Digital 2023: Cambodia,” February 13, 2023 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-cambodia>
- ² Ookla, “Speedtest Global Index: Cambodia Median Country Speeds May 2023” Accessed June 31, 2023, <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/cambodia>
- ³ Ookla, “Speedtest Global Index: Cambodia’s Mobile and Broadband Speeds,” accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/cambodia#fixed>.
- ⁴ Simon Kemp, “Digital 2023: Cambodia,” February 13, 2023 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-cambodia>; Chloe Ang, “Cambodia’s 2019 Social Media & Digital Statistics,” Geeks in Cambodia, July 16, 2019, <http://geeksincambodia.com/cambodias-2019-social-media-digital-statisti...>
- ⁵ Poovenraj Kanagaraj, “Demand for data with upcoming 5G rollout may see price increases,” Khmer Times, January 27, 2020, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50683844/demand-for-data-with-upcoming-5g-....>

More footnotes 



On Cambodia

See all data, scores & information on this country or territory.

[See More >](#)

Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

23/100 ● Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

44/100 ● Partly Free

Freedom in the World Status

Not Free

Networks Restricted

No

Social Media Blocked

No

Websites Blocked

Yes

Pro-government Commentators

Yes

Users Arrested

Yes

In Other Reports

[Freedom in the World 2023](#)

Other Years

2022



Be the first to know what's happening.

Join the Freedom House weekly
newsletter

Subscribe



ADDRESS

1850 M St. NW Floor 11
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-5101

GENERAL INQUIRIES

info@freedomhouse.org

PRESS & MEDIA

press@freedomhouse.org

@2024 FreedomHouse