

Hun Sen closes in on independent media in Cambodia

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Cambodia will hold general elections on 23 July 2023. That means it is once again time for long-standing Prime Minister Hun Sen to exert power to ensure his party, the Cambodian People's Party, comfortably wins re-election.

At the helm for nearly four decades, Hun Sen is an astute political operative who never misses an opportunity to minimise possible threats against him, his family or his party. His political skills and strongman tactics have become even more important in 2023 as he contemplates transferring power to his eldest son, [Hun Manet](#).

Independent media has long been in the crosshairs of Hun Sen. His latest target was the *Voice of Democracy* (VOD), a news agency that began as a radio station in 2003 and then developed into an online news source. It was one of the last bastions of critical media in the country. Forcing VOD shut has further narrowed what Noam Chomsky calls the '[spectrum of acceptable opinion](#)' in Cambodia. By reducing the scope and scale of dissenting opinions and discourse, Hun Sen believes he will be able to win re-election and ensure his son is seen as the rightful heir, no questions asked.

The story of VOD's downfall began some 7000 kilometres away from Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, in southeast Turkey (officially the Republic of Türkiye). In the aftermath of the 6 February earthquake, which killed thousands and displaced many more, Cambodia pledged aid to the devastated country. This was a stark role reversal for Cambodia, which received nearly half of its national budget in foreign aid as [recently as 2006](#).

When VOD reported on what should have been a rather celebratory case of South–South cooperation, [it said](#) Hun Manet signed the aid agreement on behalf of his father. This statement of fact hinted at a possible constitutional crisis. In a supposedly democratic system of governance with clear separations of power, how could Hun Manet, a lieutenant general of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, sign an agreement on behalf of the sitting prime minister? Hun Sen considered the story an attack and demanded an apology. He did not like VOD's reply, so he [cancelled its licence](#). It was shut one week later, on 13 February.

Political control over media is not simply a phenomenon of the Hun Sen era. Since the first newspapers were printed in the 1930s, powerful elites have always controlled or influenced the media. Norodom Sihanouk was known to jail journalists critical of the state during his 17-year rule. The Khmer Rouge destroyed the only television station and started its own radio station. And the governments between 1979 and 1991, within which Hun Sen first emerged on the political scene, tightly controlled the media environment.

It was only in the early 1990s, when Cambodia was under United Nations control, that the idea of a free and independent media emerged. But Hun Sen slowly eroded the idea without effective pushback by the international community. [Guidelines were codified](#) ~~developed~~ to ensure Cambodia's media landscaped looked like that of a liberal democracy, ~~were codified~~ but [they were](#) never enforced. Thomas Hammarberg, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on

Human Rights in Cambodia, said in 1998 that 'equal and equitable access to broadcast media did not exist in Cambodia'. His warning was ignored.

Virtually all Khmer-language media is now owned or controlled by close allies or family members of Hun Sen. Foreign-language media outlets such as the *Phnom Penh Post* or *The Cambodia Daily* suffered the same fate as VOD, under equally [suspicious circumstances](#). In both cases, the international community feigned displeasure, once going so far as to [partially suspend temporarily](#) special trading rights with the European Union. The threats were empty or short lived, teaching Hun Sen he could close media agencies (and opposition parties) without the threat of concrete and lasting retaliation.

The timing of the VOD closure shows Hun Sen's acute awareness of the current state of geopolitics and his growing confidence [to stymie](#) major powers competing for influence in the region. A narrative [emerged](#) that Cambodia successfully chaired ~~A-SANASEAN~~ in 2022, resulting in closer relations [with Washington](#) and other Western powers. Hun Sen gloated that he is [so close](#) to French President Emmanuel Macron that he has his personal phone number. They supposedly call each other 'brother'.

Renewed relations with the West as it tries to balance against [China's growing presence in Southeast Asia](#) provides the perfect opening for Hun Sen to dismantle the remaining vestiges of liberal democracy to consolidate his control and power. Brother Macron might even look the other way, preferring to play the long game of trying to keep Hun Sen on the side of the West in the fight against China. Good luck with [that](#).

Still, there is hope. Radio was the favorite medium in the 1990s because the United Nations distributed tens of thousands of transistor radios across the country. Today, radios have given way to the ubiquitous smartphone, opening digital spaces where dissent can thrive. Supporting these decentralised spaces may be the last, best chance for independent media in Cambodia.

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