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Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association

Quarterly Monitoring Report
**Journalism Situation
in Cambodia**

April-June 2022 | Issue No. 04



*Local officials push back a photojournalist at the NagaWorld protest in Phnom Penh on June 27, 2022.
(Hean Rangsey/VOD)*

This quarterly report from CamboJA is part of our ongoing efforts to monitor and advocate for press freedom in Cambodia. It includes brief summaries of incidents and news updates related to press freedom and freedom of expression of journalists from April-June 2022.

One significant development we have monitored this quarter is the restricted environment around the commune elections and harassment of five journalists broadcasting about the election. Additionally, several journalists were blocked from covering the strike of NagaWorld union members and employees, with authorities forcing them to stop filming and delete photos and videos.

CamboJA recorded 11 cases of harassment against 17 journalists (1 female) and observed 4 violations of journalists' right to free expression during this quarter. Also in this report, we have compiled updates on challenges facing independent media and trends in freedom of expression and media development, updates on related laws and regulations, and a special note on the journalism situation during the 2022 commune elections.

Together for Free Press

Incidents reported in this quarter

Incidents

- 1** | **Journalist Alleges Threats After Filming Traffic Police Taking Money**
- 2** | **VOD reporter threatened for taking photos of suspected forced labor operation**
- 3** | **Journalists and rights observers expelled from NagaWorld protest site**
- 4** | **Phnom Penh Municipal Court rejects former RFA reporter passport request**
- 5** | **Information Ministry revokes media licenses of three outlets over 'ethics'**
- 6** | **Provincial Court in Kampong Thom drops charges against two journalists**

Updates

- I** Cambodia press freedom index drops to 142 out of 180
- II** The Safety of Journalists takes central stage during the World Press Freedom Day
- III** Cambodians' Digital Security a Growing Concern, Experts Say
- IV** Digital publisher Yuon Chhiv released after eight months in prison
- V** Rithysen News website is resuming
- VI** Cambodian Women Journalists on the Rise
- VII** Take Gifts, but Be Truthful: Information Minister Defends Local Journalism Practice
- VIII** A new regional group, the Federation of Asia Pacific Journalists, formed at IFJ Congress
- IX** Cambodia finalizes a key policy document to promote Media, Information and Digital Literacy across the Government and all sectors of society

Updates on related laws and regulations:

- 1** Cambodia's Cybercrime Law Remains Under Review
- 2** Civil Society Organizations Call for Access to Information Law to be Approved
- 3** Cambodian Companies Now Required to Use National Domain Name

Special Note:

Journalism Situation during Communal Elections 2022

Safety & Security of Journalists

An environment free from physical and mental hazards is essential for press freedom. Also, people must enjoy freedom of expression through media or any other means without repercussions. In the past quarter, these fundamental freedoms were again threatened by local authorities and the judiciary.

Table 1: Types of Harassment

Types of harassment	No. of incident reported	No. of journalists
Legal action	2	5
Administrative action	0	0
Violence/threats	5	6
Detained for questioning	1	1
Imprisonment	3	5
TOTAL	11	17

Summaries of Incidents of Harassment Against Journalists

Among the many challenges facing Cambodian journalists, the fear of legal trouble continues to be a daily part of the job. Journalists often feel intimidated or threatened by government actions, whether it be police stopping journalists from filming or taking legal actions against them for simply doing their job.

From April to June 2022, CamboJA recorded 11 cases of harassment against 17 journalists (1 female). Five of those journalists were arrested, Five faced legal actions, Six experienced harassment and threat, and one was detained for questioning.

1. Journalist Alleges Threats After Filming Traffic Police Taking Money

Traffic polic detained and threatened a citizen journalist recording them taking money from motorists, ordering him to delete his photos and videos the journalist alleged.

Suon Vutha said he was on his way from Kampot to Phnom Penh on April 10 when he reached a checkpoint in Kandal’s Loeuk Dek district and saw taxi vans overflowing with passengers, but traffic police were taking money to look the other way.

“Some of them were overcrowded, so they just gave 20,000-30,000 riel [\$5-\$7.5] to the traffic police. They let them go without any direct law enforcement,” Vutha said.

When Vutha pulled out his phone to take videos, he was taken in for questioning for more than an hour. Officers demanded to see his “mission letter” as well as identification, and ordered him to delete his videos and sign an agreement to stop.

Vutha said he eventually signed the agreement and deleted his images so he could get away.

Loeuk Dek district governor Am Thou defended the police’s actions, saying that the orders to delete the videos were not a threat because the journalist had failed to request and receive permission from authorities at work.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3mWf2Ys>

2. VOD reporter threatened for taking photos of suspected forced labor operation

VOD reporter Mech Dara was detained for about two hours in April by General Department of Immigration in Sihanoukville after refusing to delete pictures he’d taken of a facility alleged to have been used by a forced labor operation. His phone, journalist card, institution card, social security card, and motorbike were temporarily confiscated.

“He [immigration police officer] had [threatened to use] handcuffs against me,” Dara said. “If there is a law for taking pictures in public, and I need a permission like this, I might resign to be a farmer.”

However, Information Ministry spokesman Meas Sophorn said during a panel discussion on Press Freedom Day in May that journalists’ rights and freedoms need to be in line with the law, pointing to the Press Law and stating that broadcasting disinformation or impacting the dignity of other people could lead to lawsuits.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3KDxv5q>

3. Journalists and rights observers expelled from NagaWorld protest site

On June 27, authorities expelled journalists and human rights observers from the NagaWorld rally site, including district security demanding VOD journalists delete photos and videos of authorities' activities in public places.

Responding to the action, the Information Ministry said lower-level authorities did not appear to fully understand their roles and acted outside of their remit.

"I've discussed this matter, and maybe the lower-level authorities do not understand the issue," Said Phos Sovann, the Information Ministry's information department director.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3y9vAkR>

4. Phnom Penh Municipal Court rejects former RFA reporter passport request

A Phnom Penh municipal judge has rejected a request made by a former RFA reporter to return his passport, which was seized when he was imprisoned for alleged espionage.

Yeang Sothearin submitted his request for his passport to investigating judge Pich Vichear Tho on April 3. It was rejected four days later without explanation.

"I urge the government, local authorities, and relevant parties to consider dropping my case since it lasted for a long time and without any evidence to justify that I committed something wrong," Sothearin said.

"Until now, I cannot enjoy my freedom of movement and travel, and still, have concern that the government should let me free as an ordinary citizen."

Source: <https://bit.ly/37jSD35>

5. Information Ministry revokes media licenses of three outlets over 'ethics'

The decision by Cambodian authorities to revoke licenses of three news outlets is "brazen intimidation" media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said in April.

Bayong Times, Cambodia Today, and the online outlet Khmer Cover TV, or KCTV were accused of "disseminating information that violates the ethics of journalism and business contracts being upheld," according to a March 15 letter from Sok Prasad, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Information.

Touch Yuthea of Cambodia Today, said he believes the decision is related to his news website reporting on irregularities in government contract bidding processes.

The loss of licenses is a "gross violation of the freedom of publication as enshrined in article 41 of Cambodia's constitution," Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk, said in a statement.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3yguWni>

6. Provincial Court in Kampong Thom drops charges against two journalists

The Provincial Court of Kampong Thom decided to drop charges against two journalists — Try Sophal, a reporter of NICE TV and Try Vichika, a reporter of Heang Meas TV — after the investigating judge questioned them for about two hours on June 9.

Investigating Judge Nget Nareth decided to drop all charges and close the cases against the two journalists, according to Mon Keosiven, their lawyer.

Try Sophal and Try Vichika were sued by two prosecutors in August 2021 in Preah Vihear province after the two journalists reported on the illegal clearing of state forest in Kulen district, and were accused of incitement to commit a felony and making the public lose the trust of the court decision.

Source: <https://bit.ly/39pFIO4>

Reporting in a Hostile Environment — Updates on Cambodia’s Media Situation

I. Cambodia press freedom index drops to 142 out of 180

Cambodia’s 2022 ranking in the Reporters Without Borders global press freedom index remained about the same, ticking up to 142 out of 180 countries, compared to its 144 spot last year.

According to the RSF report, the press and media had grown rapidly since the 1980s, until the government launched an assault against independent journalism before the 2018 election.

Since the clampdown in 2017, journalists have been arrested under false pretenses, and some spend months in prison on trumped-up charges of “terrorism” or “pornography”. Reporting on corruption cases that directly or indirectly affect the Prime Minister or his entourage has become virtually impossible.

“Faced with these challenges, the protection provided by the Cambodian Journalists’ Alliance (CamboJA), founded in late 2019, represents a breath of fresh air for journalists,” the group wrote.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3MGowCA>

II. The Safety of Journalists takes central stage during the World Press Freedom Day

On 2nd May, UNESCO in collaboration with the press freedom working group, which includes 24 institutions, organized a one-day conference following a town-hall debate.

Under the overall theme of “Journalism Under Digital Siege”, the conference included panel discussions with key experts on three topics: 1) Press freedom on the internet and digital safety of journalists, 2) Rights to access to information and reporting during elections 3) Journalists’ ethics and public trust. Panelists included representatives from the media NGOs, human rights organizations, the Ministry of Information, the National Election Committee, and the media.

This event marked a milestone in the efforts to promote Press Freedom in Cambodia, as a record number of 24 civil society organizations worked together with UNESCO in the organization of the event.



Nop Vy, executive director of CamboJA, speaking during Town Hall Debate marking World Press Freedom Day in Phnom Penh on Monday, May 2, 2022. CamboJA/ Pring Samrang

The meeting concluded with a declaration with recommendations to improve press freedom in Cambodia, which was handed over by a representative of the organizing committee to the Ministry of Information.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3werbw5>

III. Cambodians’ Digital Security a Growing Concern, Experts Say

Experts are concerned that while more and more Cambodians have access to the internet their knowledge of how to protect themselves from cybercrime is still in its infancy. If people don’t take any precautions, their personal information could be leaked, and they could find themselves victims of online scams.

“Based on what I have seen, most Cambodians are not familiar with or know much about digital security. If compared to other countries in the region, Cambodians, mostly young people, were only just introduced to cyberspace,” said Chy Sophat, an organizer at Barcamp Cambodia and also a content creator with the focus on technology and digital security.

He added that to deal with this issue, people should start learning digital literacy including how to use digital tools correctly and the digital security which helps them to use them safely.

Chea Vandeth, Minister of Post and Telecommunication, also thinks this is a problem, saying only 30 percent of Cambodians have basic knowledge of digital literacy and know how to use digital platforms and the internet to search for and share information.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3y53Iyt>

IV. Digital publisher Yuon Chhiv released after eight months in prison

Yuon Chhiv, the owner of Koh Kong media and the publisher of Koh Kong Hot News, was released on 30th May, 2022 after serving eight months in prison.

He was arrested in September last year and sentenced to one year in prison for inciting a crime by broadcasting false information. On April 27, he appealed to the Preah Sihanouk Court of Appeal, which reduced his sentence to eight months.

“Actually, I am happy to continue to do my job as a journalist. Because I think there are many injustices and hidden stories that need journalists like us to help report to the public,” Chhiv said. “I was threatened physically several times, but I still want to do it for the sake of the public interest.”

Source: <https://bit.ly/39fMDcE>

V. Rithysen News website is resuming

The Rithysen News website was granted a renewal license by the Ministry of Information recently. According to the Ministry of Information letter, dated 06 April 2022, the Ministry permits Sok Oudom to resume its republication through www.rithysen-news.com.

In a meeting with CamboJA on May 10, 2022, Sok Oudom said that he was very happy that the Ministry renewed his news website license after it was revoked in 2020 while he was arrested and accused of “incitement” in connection with broadcasting about a land dispute in Kampong Chhnang province.

“After being released from prison, I will continue to work as a journalist even though the situation of press freedom in Kampong Chhnang is not completely free and safe yet,” he said.

VI. Cambodian Women Journalists on the Rise

In the past 10 years, the presence of women in journalism has increased, thanks to policies promoting respect for women’s rights, freedom and advances in technology, according to a Ministry of Information report. According to the report, there were more than 470 women journalists in Cambodia in 2021, out of a total of more than 5,000 journalists. “The number of skilled and talented women journalists is growing,” said Meas Sophorn, an undersecretary of state at the ministry, though there was no official data prior to 2021 to confirm his claim.

Nop Vy, CamboJA executive director, also noted the increase of women in the journalism and media fields in the last 10 years, saying that the increase happens amid the advances in digital technology.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3scP2et>

VII. Take Gifts, but Be Truthful: Information Minister Defends Local Journalism Practice

Commemorating Press Freedom Day, Information Minister Khieu Kanharith said what mattered was that Cambodian journalists aren’t swayed from the truth — and that they could do so even while accepting gifts of cash.

Speaking at a U.N. event in Phnom Penh, Kanharith defended journalism in the country against reports of repression, saying other countries were worse when it came to shutting down news outlets and failing to mediate complaints against journalists.

Club of Cambodian Journalists president Pen Bona said Kanharith was only joking about gifts, but also said he agreed. “Maybe yes we can accept money, but as Kanharith said, not write from white to black.”

Cambodian Journalists Alliance director Nop Vy, however, said journalists should not be taking money from sources.

“Once you accept a gift, you miss the hand [that gave it],” Vy said. “As journalists, to show our purity, to show our professionalism and neutrality, we should not accept money. We should not accept bribes from our sources.”

Source: <https://bit.ly/3aoTtgI>

VIII. A new regional group, the Federation of Asia Pacific Journalists, formed at IFJ Congress

IFJ delegates from the Asia Pacific region formed a new regional group, the Federation of Asia-Pacific Journalists (FAPaJ), on May 31, during the IFJ’s triennial World Congress in Muscat, Oman. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) welcomes the formation of the new federation and congratulates the newly elected Executive Committee.

The FAPaJ becomes the fourth IFJ regional group after the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ) and the Federación de Periodistas de América Latina y el Caribe (FEPALC) and comprises representatives from the Pacific, Western Asia, Eastern Asia, Southern Asia and Central Asia.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3xbF4wH>

IX. Cambodia finalizes a key policy document to promote Media, Information and Digital Literacy across the Government and all sectors of society

Forty-one representatives from all sectors of Cambodian society and Government provided inputs and validated the National Media, Information and Digital Literacy (MIDL) Competency Framework that is being developed by UNESCO in collaboration with the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, in a two-day consultation workshop organized in Phnom Penh on 20 and 21 June 2022.

The Royal Government of Cambodia, through its “Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework 2021-2035,” aspires to build a vibrant digital economy and society by laying the foundations to promote digital adoption and transformation in all social actors, including the state, citizens, businesses, to accelerate new economic growth and promote social welfare in the new normal.

E Sophea, Undersecretary of State of the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, said that “in order to build a Digital Cambodia, it is necessary to build a society that is Media, Information and Digital literate. An important step to achieve this goal is to develop and implement a National MIDL Framework and Strategy which is at the core of the Royal Government of Cambodia’s digital policy framework to strengthen Cambodia’s potential to build a vibrant digital economy and society.”

Source: <https://bit.ly/3Al6YZi>

Updates on media-related laws and regulations

1. Cambodia’s Cybercrime Law Remains Under Review

Cambodia’s cybercrime law has remained under review since 2013. During a five-day session held by Open Development Cambodia (ODC) in Siem Reap province, key sectors from the Anti Cybercrime Department of the Ministry of Interior, the representative from journalist association CamboJA, and the Cambodia Center for Independent Media (CCIM) opened a discussion on the draft cybercrime law and its latest developments.

During the discussion, Khuon Sokpiseth, deputy director of the Anti-Cybercrime Department at the Ministry of Interior, said the cybercrime draft law has yet to be finalized due to issues with the technical wording. As of now, he said, the draft law has 55 articles and nine chapters that mainly focus on cybercrime, online scams, and child abuse exploitation.

“The ministry works with other partners, including the private sector and Ministry of Justice, to develop this legal framework. However, I am not sure whether it will be open to the public and civil societies to have an opinion on this draft law. It is the government’s decision to choose who can work on it,” he said.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3yuIamO>

2. Civil Society Organizations Call for Access to Information Law to be Approved



The draft Access to Information Law, which is intended to give the public access to government records and documents, has been delayed for at least a decade, and has been criticized for the government’s attempts to limit its scope.

Civil Society groups march to submit a letter to Prime Minister Hun Sen’s office asking him to pass the Access to Information Law. Photo taken on June 16, 2022. CamboJA/ Pring Samrang

On 16 June 2022, dozens of civil society groups marched to Prime Minister Hun Sen’s office, where they submitted a petition urging him to complete the long-delayed draft Law on Access to Information and send it to the National Assembly for approval.

The letter also called on the government to consider input from civil society groups, including the deletion of an article requiring 40 days to pass before a repeat request can be made for recently released information. The organizations also want revisions to eight more articles, including one which is meant to protect whistleblowers.

Information Ministry spokesman Meas Sophorn said that the draft Law on Access to Information had been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and said that the ministry had also taken the time to widely consult civil society groups and other stakeholders.

“However, it does not mean our Information Ministry has given up this draft law, we still remain committed to an effort to get it approved,” Sophorn said.

Source: <https://bit.ly/39ZFkq3>

3. Cambodian Companies Now Required to Use National Domain Name

As of April 2022, companies registered in Cambodia must use a level 2 national domain name ‘.com.kh’ in addition to any Cambodian email addresses and social media accounts. The requirement has been implemented under joint Notification No. 873, issued by the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) and the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPTC).

The domain names are valid for a period of one year, after which the company must renew and pay a fee to the MOC. The domain name will be deleted if it is not renewed by the owner. Further, a domain name can be deleted if requested by the authorities.

Registered businesses in Cambodia have been given until January 1, 2023, to implement the domain name changes.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3nxfooE>

Special Note: Journalism Situation during the 2022 Communal Elections

The Cambodian communal election was held on 5th June 2022, with 17 political parties participating including the Candlelight Party, made up of members of the former opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party.

Ahead of the June 5 election, civil society groups and foreign governments called on the government to set conditions for legitimacy: free and fair elections, independent media to function, neutral armed forces and included the right to stand for elections.

However, the National Election Committee (NEC) received 85 complaints against the ballot results, most of which related to the irregularities of closed-door ballot counting, and the presence of authorities at polling stations, according to CamboJA News. Other complaints involved vote counters refusing to allow observers and media workers to watch the process and prohibiting them from taking any photos.

CamboJA recorded at least four cases of harassment against five journalists during this commune elections.

A journalist from CamboJA News, **Sorn Sarath**, was banned from taking photos and questioned by local authorities when he went to cover news in Veal Sbov, Kandal province on the election day.

Three days before the election, **two journalists from VOD** were intimidated by local authorities while they were interviewing a political candidate. On June 3, the last day of political campaign activities, VOD journalists **Seng Thai** and **Hy Chay** interviewed two candidates in Phnom Penh’s Teuk La Ork 1 commune about the Cambodia People’s Party’s propaganda activities and their plans to serve their constituents., when a third candidate asked to take photos of the journalists and their media credentials from the NEC.

“We do not understand why they take photos of our cards and ask for phone numbers,” Seng Thai said. “We are scared since we do not know what they are going to do with this information.”

Seng Thai said that on election day, he and another colleague, **Huy Ousa**, interviewed 5 people at the polling station at Wat Chak Ongre Leu, where a man in civilian clothes asked them: What are you interviewing about? What channel are you going to broadcast on and when? And whether they asked people about who they were going to vote for?

Thai said he understood the questions as “a threat to free press during the election,” noting that if they had asked about who people were voting for, they may have been arrested or prosecuted like a pair of Cambodia Daily journalists charged for election reporting in 2013.

Sun Narin, a reporter for VOA, also encountered the same challenges when he went to cover news at several polling places in Lvea Aem district, Kandal province during the election day. He said he saw many local authorities inside and outside of polling stations.

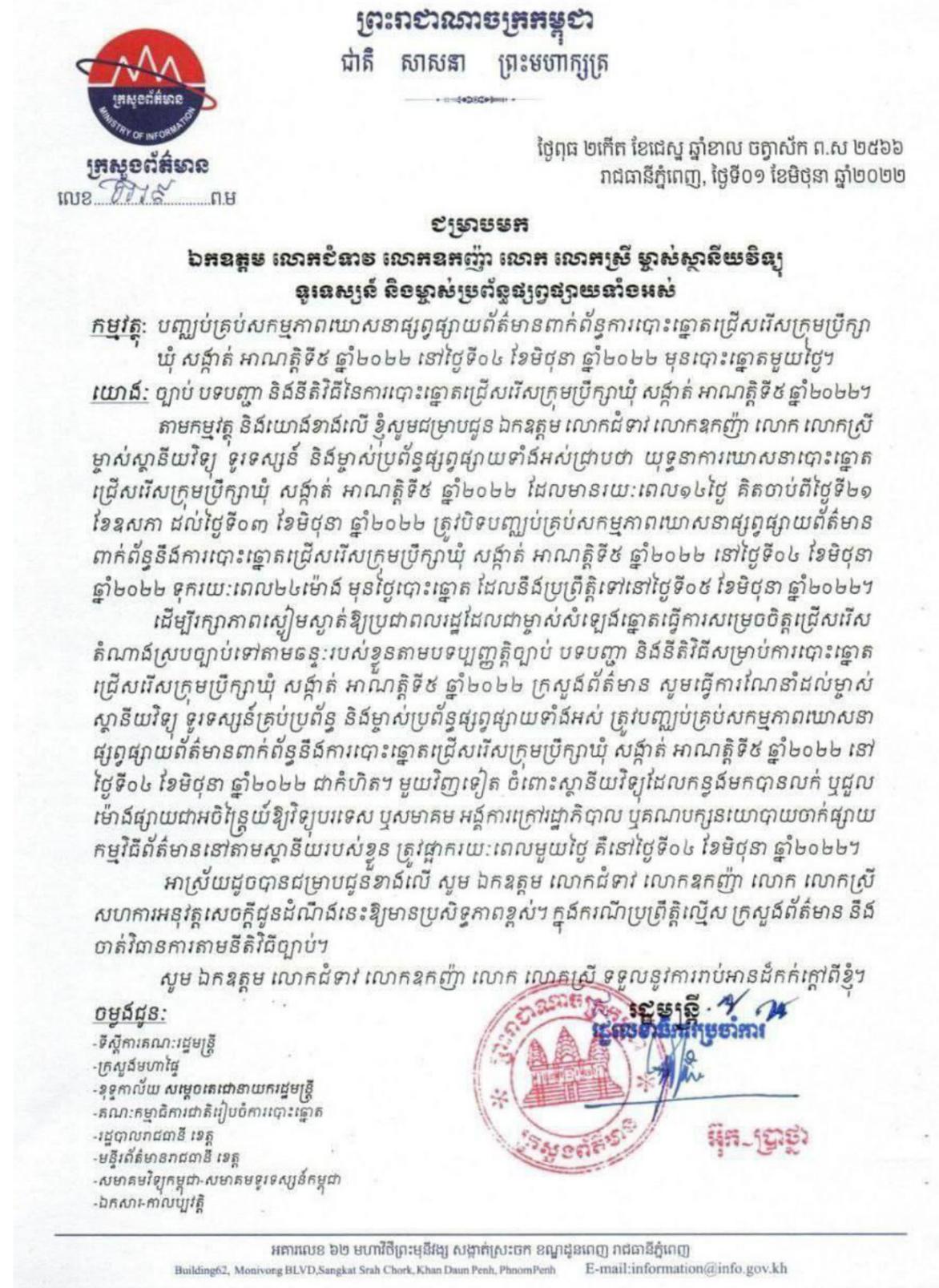
When he went to take photos at the Arey Ksat voting station, two police officers came and stop him from taking any photos, and then asked him to wait for their boss to come. After waiting for a while, he decided to go. The police also asked him, "What is the next polling station are you going to?" to which he said he wasn't sure.

"I think this case is often happening to journalists and many local authorities do not understand the rights and duties of journalists. But the local authorities raised that they just followed the guidelines of NEC, so NEC should issue a clear guideline stating the rights of journalists that they can take any photos without asking permission," Narin said.

CamboJA News Editor-in-chief Chhorn Chansy said journalists are still facing a restricted environment while doing their jobs, especially during this commune election.

One day ahead of the election day, which is the so-called "White Day", the Ministry of Information issued a letter ordering all media outlets to stop broadcasting all news related to the commune election and not allow political parties to carry out any activities that impact the exercising of journalist's rights.

Chansy said the letter is mean to pressure and restrict journalists from covering news on this important day.



The Ministry of Information issued a letter on 1st June 2022 ordering all media outlets to stop broadcasting all news related to the commune election on 4th June 2022, one day ahead of the election day.



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