

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023

Cambodia

24
/100

NOT FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	5/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	19/60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

24 /100 ● Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



Overview

Cambodia's political system has been dominated by Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) for more than three decades. While the country conducted semicompetitive elections in the past, the 2018 elections were held in a severely repressive environment. Since then, Hun Sen's government has maintained pressure on opposition party members, independent press outlets, and demonstrators with intimidation, politically motivated prosecutions, and violence.

Key Developments in 2022

- Members of the opposition continued to face repression during the year; in March, 19 members of the banned opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) were sentenced to between 5 and 10 years in prison on politically motivated charges including incitement and conspiracy. In a separate case, in October, exiled CNRP leader Sam Rainsy was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment on specious charges related to his political activism.
- June local elections saw the ruling CPP take 80 percent of the vote, while the opposition Candlelight Party won 18 percent. The Candlelight Party's performance in the polls, which were neither free nor fair, was celebrated by leaders of the country's heavily repressed opposition.
- Constitutional amendments that would permit the ruling party to appoint the country's prime minister without parliamentary approval were signed into law in August. The amendments have been widely condemned as an undemocratic attempt to allow incumbent prime minister Hun Sen to eventually name his son, Hun Manet, as his successor.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0/4

King Norodom Sihamoni is chief of state, but has little political power. The prime minister is head of government, and is appointed by the monarch from among the majority coalition or party in parliament following legislative elections. Hun Sen first became prime minister in 1985. He was nominated most recently after 2018 National Assembly polls, which offered voters no meaningful choice. Most international observation groups were not present due to the highly restrictive nature of the contest.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0/4

The bicameral parliament consists of the 62-seat Senate and the 125-seat National Assembly. Members of parliament and local councilors indirectly elect 58 senators, and the king and National Assembly each appoint 2. Senators serve six-year terms, while National Assembly members are directly elected to five-year terms.

In 2018, the CPP won every seat in both chambers in elections that were considered neither free nor fair. Several small, obscure new “opposition parties” ran candidates in the lower-house elections, though many of these were believed to have been manufactured by government allies to suggest multiparty competition.

Local elections held in June 2022 saw the ruling CPP take 80 percent of the vote, while the opposition Candlelight Party won 18 percent. The Candlelight Party’s performance in the polls, which were neither free nor fair, was celebrated by leaders of the country’s heavily repressed opposition. Prior to the June elections, the CPP held 95 percent of local elected positions.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

1/4

Election laws permit security forces to take part in campaigns, punish parties that boycott parliament, and mandate a campaign period of 21 days. The laws have been broadly enforced.

The CPP has complete control over the nine seats of the National Election Committee (NEC). In 2018, the NEC sought to aid the CPP's campaign by threatening to prosecute any figures that urged an election boycott, and informing voters that criticism of the CPP was prohibited.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

0/4

Cambodia is a de facto one-party state. The main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) was banned in the run-up to the 2018 elections, and its leaders have been charged with crimes. In late 2021, the opposition Candlelight Party resumed independent operations. After the Candlelight Party won 18 percent of seats in the June 2022 local elections, the government quickly cracked down on its supporters and leaders, again weakening the opposition.

Members of the political opposition, including CNRP members and supporters and a broad range of other political activists, have faced harassment and arrests. In March 2022, 19 CNRP members—including party leader Sam Rainsy and deputy party leader

Mu Sochua—were sentenced to between 5 and 10 years in prison on spurious charges of incitement and conspiracy.

In a separate case in October, Sam Rainsy was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment for purportedly plotting to cede Cambodian territory to a “foreign entity”; the specious charges were based on the opposition leader’s 2013 pledge to uphold the land rights of Indigenous Cambodians. Additionally, a yearslong trial against opposition leader Kem Sokha on politically motivated charges of treason concluded in December; the verdict had not been not pronounced before year’s end.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

0 / 4

The political opposition has been quashed through an ongoing government campaign of harassment, arrests, and convictions of opposition figures, supporters, and perceived supporters, carried out alongside severe restrictions on press freedom, free assembly, and civil society. In the lead-up to the 2018 polls, the Supreme Court banned the main opposition party, the CNRP; several of its members were jailed, and many others fled the country.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

1 / 4

The ruling party is not democratically accountable, and top leaders, especially Hun Sen, use the police and armed forces as instruments of repression. The military has stood firmly behind Hun Sen.

The Chinese government, Cambodia’s biggest patron, has increasingly come to influence major government decisions. In June 2022, Chinese and Cambodian officials broke ground on a new facility on Cambodia’s Ream Naval Base, near Sihanoukville.

This new facility is widely believed to be a base for Chinese naval activities, though both the Chinese and Cambodian governments have denied the allegation.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

1/4

Ethnic minorities, especially those of Vietnamese descent, are regularly excluded from the political process and scapegoated by both the CPP and the opposition. Women make up 15 percent of the National Assembly, but their interests, like those of most citizens, are poorly represented.

Voting is tied to a citizen's permanent-resident status in a village, township, or urban district; this status cannot be easily changed.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

0/4

Hun Sen has increasingly centralized power, and figures outside of his close circle have little impact on policymaking. Hun Sen's son, General Hun Manet, has been named to several key posts during his father's rule, including that of deputy commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF). In December 2021, the CPP's central committee unanimously voted to endorse Hun Manet as "future prime minister."

New constitutional amendments signed into law in August 2022 allow the ruling party to select a prime minister without parliamentary approval. The amendments have been widely condemned as an attempt to ensure Hun Manet's dynastic succession to the premiership.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

1/4

Anticorruption laws are poorly enforced, and corruption is pervasive in public procurement and tax administration, to the benefit of Prime Minister Hun Sen and his family.

Members of the prime minister's family have also allegedly used their positions to keep millions of dollars in assets abroad.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

1/4

Nepotism and patronage undermine the functioning of a transparent bureaucratic system. A draft access to information law was finalized in 2019, but the government still had not passed the bill by year-end 2022. International information rights groups have criticized the bill, warning it does not meet international standards.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

1/4

The government uses lawsuits, criminal prosecutions, massive tax bills, and occasionally violent attacks to harass and intimidate the media. There are private print and broadcast outlets, but many are owned and operated by the CPP.

Since 2017, the government has engaged in an intense crackdown on independent media. In 2018, the *Phnom Penh Post*, an independent newspaper, was sold to a Malaysian investor with links to Hun Sen, and many of its editors and reporters quit or were fired. The government stripped the licenses of three digital media outlets in March 2022—the Bayong Times, Khmer Cover TV (KCTV), and Cambodia Today—for allegedly “violating journalistic ethics” after they published stories on government corruption.

While progovernment media organizations operate freely, foreign media groups operate with more severe restrictions and in some instances are forced out of the country altogether.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

3/4

The majority of Cambodians are Theravada Buddhists and can practice their faith freely, but societal discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities persists.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

2/4

Teachers and students practice self-censorship regarding discussions about Cambodian politics and history. Criticism of the prime minister and his family is often punished.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	1/4
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Open criticism of the prime minister and government by private citizens can result in reprisals, notably during the run-up to elections.

Free expression has been increasingly restricted in recent years. In 2020, the government enacted legislation giving Hun Sen the power to declare a state of emergency that would grant authorities vast powers to conduct digital surveillance, ban assemblies, and ban or limit broadcasting, among other provisions that amounted to virtually unchecked powers. In 2021, dozens of people were arrested for criticizing the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hun Sen has proposed instituting a single internet gateway, which would centralize internet traffic and increase the government's capacity for internet censorship and online surveillance. If adopted, internet users' private speech and personal expression would be drastically limited.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts	
Is there freedom of assembly?	1/4

Authorities are openly hostile to free assembly. Gatherings by the banned opposition CNRP are prohibited. Demonstrations related to politics, labor rights, land disputes, and anything else the government considers sensitive are routinely dispersed by security forces, who frequently subject peaceful protesters to threats, excessive violence, and arbitrary detention.

The introduction of a law on “Preventive Measures Against the Spread of COVID-19” and other contagious diseases in 2021 allows the government to “ban or restrict any gathering or demonstration” in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Those who violate the law could be subject to lengthy prison sentences and fines of up to 20 million riels (\$5,000).

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

1/4

Activists and civil society groups dedicated to justice and human rights risk violence and typically face state harassment and arrest, as do activists involved in land disputes.

A 2020 report issued by the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) in Cambodia found that human rights activists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are often subjected to undue “interference, intimidation, or harassment” by Cambodian authorities.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

1/4

Cambodia has a small number of independent trade unions, and workers have the right to strike, but many face retribution for doing so. Authorities continue to crack down on labor leaders and those who strike.

In 2022, hundreds of NagaWorld casino workers were violently arrested while participating in a strike against their employer. Several of the women arrested during the strike reported being assaulted by security forces. Prominent union leader Chhim Sithar was arrested while striking in January 2022 and held in pretrial detention until March; she was rearrested in November for allegedly violating her bail conditions. She

remained in pretrial detention through the end of the year. The strike, which began in December 2021, was ongoing at year's end.

In November 2022, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report chronicling how the government has used the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to crack down on independent unions and arrest union members.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0/4

The judiciary is marred by corruption and a lack of independence. Judges have facilitated the government's ability to pursue charges against a broad range of opposition politicians.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

1/4

Due process rights are poorly upheld in Cambodia. Abuse by law enforcement officers and judges remains extremely common. Sham trials are frequent, while elites generally enjoy impunity.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

1/4

Cambodians live in an environment of repression and fear, which has accelerated in recent years as Hun Sen has consolidated power. The torture of suspects and prisoners is frequent.

The work of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), established to try the leaders of the former Khmer Rouge regime, has brought convictions for crimes against humanity, homicide, torture, and religious persecution against three former Khmer Rouge leaders. The 2018 convictions of Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, two surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge, marked the first time the Khmer Rouge crimes were legally defined as genocide. In September 2022, the ECCC rejected a final appeal from former top leader Khieu Samphan. The ECCC, which Hun Sen never fully supported, concluded in December 2022.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

1/4

Ethnic minorities, especially those of Vietnamese descent, often face legal and societal discrimination.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

2/4

The constitution guarantees the rights to freedom of travel and movement, and the government generally respects these rights in practice.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

1/4

Land and property rights are regularly abused for the sake of private development projects. Over the past several years, hundreds of thousands of people have been forcibly removed from their homes, with little or no compensation, to make room for commercial plantations, mine operations, factories, and high-end residential developments. Land disputes are common, and security forces typically respond to protests with force.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

2/4

The government does not frequently repress personal social freedoms, but women suffer widespread social discrimination. Rape and violence against women are common.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

1/4

Equality of opportunity is severely limited in Cambodia, where a small elite controls most of the economy. Labor conditions can be harsh, sometimes sparking protests and crackdowns. Exploitative working conditions and wage theft are common; in April 2021, numerous garment workers reported that their legally guaranteed severance pay had been withheld.

Cambodia is a country of origin, destination, and transit point for sex and labor trafficking. In its 2022 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, the US State Department dropped Cambodia to Tier 3, the lowest possible level, noting that while the government continued to prosecute some trafficking cases, credible reports accusing government officials of colluding with labor traffickers were not investigated.



On Cambodia

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

23/100 ● Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

44/100 ● Partly Free

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2024



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info@freedomhouse.org

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

PRESS & MEDIA
press@freedomhouse.org

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