

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2017

Cambodia

31
/100

NOT FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	11 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	20 /60

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 his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) for more than three decades. The country has held semicompetitive elections, and the opposition has a significant presence in Parliament, but opposition figures are routinely beaten, arrested, and imprisoned. While civil society is relatively strong, activists working on environmental, land, labor, and civil rights issues face severe intimidation. Social media and independent news outlets have begun to challenge the control of progovernment media, though journalists and social media users who criticize the authorities risk prosecution or extralegal violence. A climate of impunity remains a serious obstacle to criminal cases of any type against powerful Cambodians.

Key Developments in 2016

- In July, prominent political commentator and activist Kem Ley was assassinated in the capital. Human rights groups criticized major flaws in the subsequent police investigation.
- Throughout the spring and summer, the government pursued criminal investigations against opposition leader Kem Sokha and other members of his Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). Kem Sokha received a five-month jail term in September for failing to appear in court as a witness in one of the cases, which centered on his alleged extramarital affair. He remained holed up in the CNRP headquarters to avoid arrest, but received a royal pardon at the prime minister's request in December.
- Opposition leader Sam Rainsy, who remained in exile throughout the year and faced multiple criminal cases, was convicted in November in a defamation case involving criticism of the prime minister and ordered to pay fines and compensation. He was also sentenced to five years in prison in December over a post to his Facebook page regarding a border dispute with Vietnam.
- In July, the nongovernmental organization Global Witness released a report suggesting that Prime Minister Hun Sen and his family had amassed at least

\$200 million in assets since he took office, noting that the true total could be much larger.

Executive Summary

Cambodia's political situation deteriorated in 2016, undermining compromises made between the opposition and the ruling CPP in 2014. The authorities secured criminal convictions against both major leaders of the opposition, but CNRP president Sam Rainsy remained in exile, and his deputy, Kem Sokha, received a royal pardon in December. Meanwhile, the government pursued charges against many other opposition figures and civil society activists, several of whom remained in detention at year's end. CNRP lawmakers protested the government pressure by boycotting Parliament sessions from May through November. Hun Sen publicly warned the opposition that he planned a tough approach to dissent ahead of local elections in 2017 and national elections in 2018.

Some critics of the government faced extralegal violence in 2016. Prominent activist Kem Ley was murdered at a gas station in broad daylight in July. His family later fled the country. The authorities quickly arrested the alleged gunman, but suspicions grew over who was really behind the murder, with human rights groups and other observers pointing to serious gaps in the official investigation. The government rejected calls for an independent probe into Kem Ley's death.

Beginning in May, human rights activists held a series of "Black Monday" demonstrations in Phnom Penh and other locations, protesting state abuses and seeking justice for those detained on politically motivated charges. Participants were regularly arrested, and at least one foreigner involved with the protests was deported.

A telecommunications law that took effect in December 2015 granted state authorities unchecked power to monitor personal communications during the year, potentially exposing individuals to criminal prosecution for their comments. No arrests under the new law were reported, though prosecutions for public comments on social media remained common. Separately, a law adopted in April imposed new restrictions on trade unions, but it had yet to take full effect at year's end.

In July, Global Witness released a report indicating that the family of Hun Sen, who receives a government salary of less than \$15,000 a year, had created a vast network of private companies linked to government patronage and contracts. The report found that the prime minister's family had amassed holdings of at least \$200 million, with higher estimates ranging into the billions. Several members of the family have also been placed in key political and security positions.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

F. Rule of Law

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

This country report has been abridged for *Freedom in the World 2017*. For background information on political rights and civil liberties in Cambodia, see *Freedom in the World 2016*.



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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ADDRESS

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

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info@freedomhouse.org

PRESS & MEDIA

press@freedomhouse.org

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