

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021

Cambodia

24
/100

NOT FREE

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

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

25/100 ● 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 polls 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 2020

- The government arrested and tried scores of opposition activists, union leaders, journalists, and other opponents throughout the year—often on charges of “incitement,” or over crimes ostensibly related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a relatively minimal impact in Cambodia. In August, the European Union imposed trade sanctions on Cambodia in response to Hun Sen's extensive, ongoing repression.
- Citing the need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government enacted legislation that gave Hun Sen power to declare a state of emergency that would grant him vast, virtually unchecked power. If invoked, the designation would increase government surveillance capabilities and allow Hun Sen to further restrict media, assembly, travel, and business activities.
- A prominent Thai dissident vanished from Cambodia in June, reportedly shoved into a black sedan by armed men and then disappearing. He is one of many Thai activists who have disappeared or were found dead in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in recent years.
- Judges sitting in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), which oversees the trials of surviving members of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, terminated a case against a defendant charged with committing genocide against a Muslim group, likely marking an end to the body's work.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

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 by established international observers, and prompted condemnation from many democracies. In the lead-up to the vote the Supreme Court had banned the main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP); many of its members were jailed, and numerous media outlets were closed. 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.

A3 0-4 pts

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

1/4

In 2015, Cambodia passed two new election laws that permit security forces to take part in campaigns, punish parties that boycott parliament, and mandate a shorter campaign period of 21 days. The laws have been broadly enforced.

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

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

Following the 2018 elections, Cambodia is a de facto one-party state. The main opposition CNRP was banned and its leaders have been charged with crimes, while other prominent party figures have fled the country. Although several small opposition parties contested the 2018 lower-house elections, none won seats. All of the smaller parties were permitted to run by the CPP-controlled NEC, and both domestic and international observers questioned their authenticity.

CNRP members and supporters and a broad range of other opposition activists were subject to harassment and arrests throughout 2020. At least 100 party members and civil society representatives were put on trial together late in the year, including leading opposition figures Sam Rainsy and Mo Sochua, who stood trial in absentia. In August, security forces arrested four opposition activists, and separately arrested Suong Sophorn, the president of a minor opposition party. In July, the police broke up a protest by CNRP supporters, and at least 16 CNRP activists were detained between January and June.

The government has continued a prosecution against CNRP official Kem Sokha, who was originally accused of treason in 2017 over a speech he gave four years earlier in which he disclosed having received US training on building grassroots support. Kem Sokha, who maintains his innocence, spent a year in solitary confinement before he was released on bail in late 2018. In November 2019, he was freed from house arrest, but at the end of 2020 remained under court supervision ahead of his impending trial.

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. The high rate of spoiled ballots in the 2018 lower house election—8.6 percent of all votes, according to the NEC—suggested strong popular discontent with the lack of choice, especially given that Hun Sen had repeatedly warned Cambodians not to spoil ballots.

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 and his crackdown on opposition. Hun Sen has built a personal bodyguard unit in the armed forces that he reportedly uses to harass and abuse CPP opponents.

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

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. Analysts also believe the prime minister is grooming his son, General Hun Manet, to succeed him. Hun Manet has gained several key posts during his father's rule, including the commander of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF). Hun Sen's June 2020 remarks that he wanted to "support my son and train him so that he is capable" were interpreted as confirmation of these suspicions, though Hun Sen also has said that he wants to remain in charge for another decade.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	1/4
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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. In 2018, anticorruption nongovernmental organization (NGO) Global Witness claimed that the prime minister's family benefited from ownership stakes in firms worth over \$200 million; these companies were involved in projects varying from gold mining to the construction of Phnom Penh's international airport.

Members of the prime minister's family have also used their positions to keep millions of dollars in assets abroad, and have acquired Cypriot passports through its Citizenship by Investment program; participants must invest at least €2 million (\$2.4 million) in order to qualify.

Senior CPP senators have been implicated in acts of corruption, benefiting from smuggling operations and illegal land concessions.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	1/4
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Nepotism and patronage undermine the functioning of a transparent bureaucratic system. A draft access to information law was made public in 2018 and was finalized in 2019, but the government added the bill to its long-term strategic plan, delaying its implementation to 2023. Human Rights Watch (HRW) and ARTICLE 19, a British NGO that advocates for greater freedom of information worldwide, criticized the bill in December 2019, warning it did 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 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. The independent English-language newspaper *Cambodia Daily* closed that year after it was issued an onerous tax bill. It has since been relaunched as an online news aggregator. 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.

Chinese investments also influence Cambodian press output. Fresh News, a progovernment news site, has distributed content from Chinese state media since accepting outside investment in 2018.

While progovernment media organizations operate freely, foreign media groups operate with more severe restrictions and in some instances forced out of the country altogether. Radio Free Asia (RFA), which reported on forced evictions and corruption in the country, was forced to close its Phnom Penh bureau in late 2017. Two of its journalists, Uon Chhin and Yeang Sothearin, were arrested and charged with espionage soon after. Their trial began in July 2019, and in 2020 courts twice rejected their petitions to dismiss the charges.

Two former staff members of the *Cambodia Daily*, Cambodian Aun Pheap and Canadian Zsombor Peter, were charged with incitement to commit a felony in 2017

after writing about local elections being held that May. Both journalists subsequently fled the country, and the charges against them were dropped in November 2020. A number of journalists faced incitement charges in 2020, including Ros Sokhet, publisher of the private *Cheat Khmer* newspaper, who was arrested in June; Sok Oudom, owner of the Rithysen Radio News Station, detained in May; and Sovann Rithy of the TVFB news outlet, charged in April.

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. The government has increasingly used Facebook to spread disinformation about or smear activist monks; one such monk, Luon Sovath, fled the country in 2020 after being targeted.

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

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 come under further restriction in 2020. In April, several weeks after authorities announced such plans, the government enacted legislation that gave Hun Sen the power to declare a state of emergency that granted authorities vast powers to conduct digital surveillance, ban assemblies, ban or limit broadcasting, fix prices, and confiscate equipment, among other provisions that amounted to virtually unchecked powers. While a state of emergency was never declared, Hun Sen issued numerous threats as the global pandemic became apparent: for example, warning in early March that anyone who spread “fake news” would be considered a terrorist. A number of people, including private citizens and those considered political opponents, were indeed arrested throughout year on the pretext of spreading false information about COVID-19 or purportedly contravening government narratives about public health.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to numerous arrests predicated on spreading false information about the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the adoption of a new emergency law that further empowers the government to conduct surveillance and punish expressions of dissent.

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 now-banned major opposition party are prohibited. The authorities repeatedly broke up protests, often using violence, throughout 2020.

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, as do activists involved in land disputes.

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. A 2016 law on unions imposed restrictions such as excessive requirements for union formation. In July 2020, authorities arrested union leader Rong Chhun on incitement charges.

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. The torture of suspects and prisoners is frequent. The security forces are regularly accused of using excessive force against detained suspects.

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. In 2018, the tribunal found Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, two surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge, guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity. They both received life sentences; both had already been sentenced to life in prison for past convictions of crimes against humanity. The convictions marked the first time the Khmer Rouge crimes were legally defined as genocide. Nuon Chea died in August 2019 and Kaing Guek Eav, or Duch, died in August 2020.

Three defendants remain under the jurisdiction of the ECCC; the body was split over whether to continue the trial against one, Ao An, leading to an impasse. Ultimately, in August 2020 the court terminated the case against Ao An, who was accused of overseeing the genocide of the Cham Muslim minority during the Khmer Rouge period. It seems unlikely the tribunal will hear any further cases.

A prominent Thai dissident vanished from Cambodia in June 2020, reportedly shoved into a black sedan by armed men and then disappearing.

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. The Cambodian government frequently refuses to grant refugee protections to Montagnards fleeing Vietnam, where they face persecution by

the Vietnamese government. LGBT+ individuals have no legal protection against 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. However, restrictions do occur, notably when the government tries to prevent activists from traveling around the country. The new emergency law allows the government to restrict movement severely if invoked.

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

2/4

over appearance?

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 the government cracked down on labor protests in 2020.

Cambodia is a country of origin, destination point, and transit point for sex and labor trafficking. In its 2020 *Trafficking in Persons* report, the US State Department noted that Cambodia is on the Tier 2 watch list, potentially to be dropped into Tier 3, as while it is working to prosecute traffickers and establishing long-term plans to combat trafficking, it failed to show improved efforts in these areas compared to 2019.



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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