FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS ATTACKED

On August 12, Cambodia’s Constitutional Council declared the highly contested Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO) constitutional both in its content and in the process of its drafting and approval. Within a day, the King had signed the law, which would take effect ten days after in the capital Phnom Penh, and 20 days after in the provinces.

As early as August 15, however, the LANGO was already being invoked to threaten the freedom of association of Cambodian citizens. On this day, district police in Kratie province informed a representative of a group of 69 families seeking a resolution to their land dispute that they needed to register before any further action could be taken. The LANGO stipulates that failure of an association or group to register with the government can be subject to fines, and prosecuted as a criminal offense. Additionally, long term partners of LICADHO Canada: CCFC and IDEA, have also been prohibited or banned from organising meetings since the LANGO was passed.

It is in this environment, under a ‘culture of dialogue’ between the two main political parties, and with the ruling party terrified of a ‘colour revolution’ that LICADHO Canada and our partners continue to strive for justice.

CULTURE OF INTIMIDATION

In May 2015, Prime Minister Hun Sen and Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) President Sam Rainsy signed a seven-point code of conduct laying out what party members are allowed to say in public speeches under the ‘culture of dialogue’.

The ruling Cambodia People’s Party (CPP) insists that the ‘culture of dialogue’ aims only to encourage friendly and productive dialogue between the two parties.

In reality, the ‘culture of dialogue’ is used by the regime to censor critical opinions from the opposition, and to justify arbitrary arrests of opposition officials accused of threatening it.
In July and August, 14 opposition party members and supporters were arrested after the opposition boycotted the National Assembly and the Senate sessions that passed the LANGO.

Also in July, four opposition parliamentarians led more than a thousand opposition members and supporters to the disputed border demarcation between Cambodia and Vietnam in Svay Rieng province. This incident escalated tensions between the two parties, and seems to have been a motivating factor in the arrest of an opposition party Senator on August 15 after he posted maps regarding the border dispute on his Facebook account.

Many groups from multiple sectors across civil society mobilized to halt the passage of the LANGO. After the Prime Minister announced in April that the government was intent on passing the law, land activists, unions, NGOs, youth, and even members of the LGBT community passionately took to the streets and social media to expose the threat LANGO poses to Cambodian civil society and human rights.

The campaign peaked with hundreds of protesters taking part in weekly rallies, marches, and impromptu dances from late June to mid July.

At the end of July, the regime moved to discourage further rallies against LANGO. Government officials began publicly framing the rallies as part of a ‘colour revolution’ allegedly masterminded by western countries. The Prime Minister himself, along with the Minister of Defence, called on the armed forces to be loyal to the government and suppress any signs of a ‘colour revolution’.

Since the widely exaggerated rumours of a ‘colour revolution’ began, two monks have been defrocked and arrested. Both lived in the same pagoda as Venerable Seung Hai, a monk who has previously been arrested for his activism.

Similarly, three activists from Mother Nature have been arrested while protesting illegal sand dredging in Koh Kong province. Mother Nature
POWER OF THE PEOPLE

Regardless of the continuing threats and attacks against activists and groups demanding justice and their rights, around 1,400 people from over 50 communities, civil society organisations and other grassroots groups gathered on October 5 to celebrate World Habitat Day.

The celebrations started at the former location of Dey Krahorm community, whose members are famous for their non-violent resistance before being violently evicted in 2009. During the celebrations, community representatives from various provinces shared their stories about land grabbing and forced eviction, followed by a march to the National Assembly to submit petitions.

This was the first large scale civil society event organised since the passage of LANGO. Although various security forces repeatedly tried to interfere with celebrations by setting up blockades, the group bravely submitted their petitions and appealed to the authorities to stop forced evictions and land grabbing, while showing no fear for the governments intimidation strategies.

On August 20, a university student was arrested over a Facebook post in which he called for people in Cambodia to join him in a ‘colour revolution’. After his arrest, a government official stated that the authorities also plan to arrest journalists if they write about a ‘colour revolution’.

A dictator’s worst nightmare is when people come together to demand their rights. In Cambodia, the momentum is slowly shifting in this direction.

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