

Cambodia 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Cambodia during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests of journalists, and censorship; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; significant and systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association; violence or threats against labor activists or union members; and significant presence of any of the worst forms of child labor.

The government did not take credible steps or action to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

Criminal groups, including local and transnational online scam center operators, were significant perpetrators of violent crimes; they physically and sexually abused, exploited, and extorted individuals, and bribed police and government officials. The government did not take credible steps or actions to investigate and prosecute these crimes or hold criminally

accountable officials involved in widespread, credible reports of complicity.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government did not generally respect this right. The government greatly restricted free expression, including by independent news media and other dissenting voices; many individuals and institutions reported widespread self-censorship, particularly on social media.

The constitution provided for freedom of speech, yet penalized any speech

deemed to damage public security. Election laws required civil society organizations to remain “neutral” during political campaigns and prohibited them from “insulting” political parties in media.

The government arrested and prosecuted several citizens on politically motivated disinformation and misdemeanor “incitement” charges.

The government restricted academic freedom and pro-opposition political discussion at schools and universities; school principals and senior teachers often forced students to join government-allied networks and disseminated political messages that supported the ruling party or criticized opposition parties. Scholars exercised caution when teaching politically sensitive subjects due to fear of offending politicians or government officials.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

Threats and violence against journalists and reporters were common.

Observers reported 39 cases of threats and harassment against journalists and reporters as of August. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Cambodian Center for Independent Media and the Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association produced a report in September noting that in 2023 at least 59 journalists were harassed, an increase of nearly 10 percent from 2022.

Media reported that on September 30, police arrested Mech Dara, a

prominent journalist who reported on online scam operations and other trafficking in persons matters, on charges of incitement for a series of unrelated social media posts. On October 24, the government released Dara on bail subject to court supervision and travel restrictions after he agreed to publicly state that his posts were fake and harmed the reputation of the country, Prime Minister Hun Manet, and Cambodian People's Party (CPP) leader Hun Sen. Domestic NGOs and media groups called his arrest an attempt to intimidate and silence Dara and other journalists.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

The government, military, and CPP owned or otherwise influenced most newspapers and broadcast media. A few independent media outlets remained but avoided publishing sensitive news stories. Although the law prohibited censorship and no formal censorship system existed, the government used other means to censor media, most notably through legal complaints, threats and harassment, and control of permits and licenses for journalists and media outlets not controlled directly by the government or the CPP.

In August the Ministry of Information promulgated a binding charter for professional journalism. Some provisions in the charter were vague and could be interpreted arbitrarily. One section stated that freedom of

expression and press did not confer immunity from prosecution, while another one mentioned that media should not work for the interests of or under the influence of donors.

One organization recorded three revocations of media licenses, six defamation complaints, three threats, and 18 cases of harassment against journalists from January to August.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law broadly provided for the right of private-sector workers to form and join independent trade unions of their own choice, to bargain collectively, and to strike. The law excluded certain categories of workers from joining unions, placed significant restrictions on the right to organize, limited the right to strike, facilitated government intervention in internal union affairs, permitted the government as well as third parties to seek the dissolution of trade unions, and imposed only minor penalties on employers for unfair labor practices.

The government failed to effectively enforce laws that protected union and labor rights. Penalties for antiunion discrimination in hiring and dismissing employees were commensurate with those for other types of discrimination. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. Union

leaders had the legal right to make complaints against antiunion discrimination, but as of August the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training (Ministry of Labor) reported no instances of noncompliance resulting in punishments or fines.

Civil servants, teachers, state-owned firm employees, and workers in the banking, health care, and informal industries could organize only associations, not trade unions, which gave them fewer protections than unionized trades. The law also prohibited illiterate workers from holding union leadership positions. Unregistered unions were illegal.

Some union leaders estimated that nearly 90 percent of registered unions were “inactive and pro-employers and government.” They added that independent organizers faced discrimination in forming new unions. In their joint statement to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review in February, 20 human and labor rights NGOs noted that registration applications were rejected for trivial reasons such as minor spacing, punctuation, grammatical or spelling mistakes, resulting in a time-consuming process of resubmission. Based on data compiled by the 20 NGOs, as of February at least 23 local union registrations remained pending, some for more than a year.

At its June session, the International Labor Organization’s Committee on the Application of Standards stated the persistence of legal and practical obstacles to freedom of association in the country was “particularly regrettable.”

In some circumstances, employers and local government officials allegedly refused to provide essential papers for unions to register. In other cases, provincial-level labor officials reportedly stalled registration applications indefinitely by requesting additional materials or resubmissions due to minor errors late in the 30-day application cycle, although anecdotal evidence suggested this practice had decreased, particularly for unions in the garment and footwear sectors. Some employers used the lengthy registration process to fire elected union officials prior to a union's formal registration, rendering them unable to serve as union executives and further drawing out the registration process. Some banks reportedly refused to provide accounts for unregistered unions, preventing the union from receiving legal recognition, which required a bank account. Some local unions reported it took months or years to form their unions. In most cases, unions encountered significant obstacles in organizing in Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which operated under the authority of the Cambodia Special Economic Zone Board (under the Council for Development of Cambodia) and were exempt from a variety of rules and regulations. Employers reportedly worked with authorities to thwart labor organizing in certain SEZs, and companies fired workers because of union action without consequence. Some government officials indicated that independent unions were not welcome in the SEZs they administered; only “progovernment” unions were permitted to exist in those zones.

Many factory owners hired employees using short-term contracts, which

union officials said allowed companies to remove union organizers by letting their contracts expire while extending contracts of nonunion employees.

Union activists described how some factory owners closed their factories, ending unions and dismissing aging workers, only to turn around and launch a new operation with younger, nonunionized, and lower-paid employees.

In their joint statement to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review in February, 20 human and labor rights NGOs noted that based on data collected from their union members, at least 49 factories failed to convert short-term contracts into permanent contracts for nearly 34,000 workers, and 630 elected union members were not hired under a permanent contract after forming unions.

While workers enjoyed the right to strike, the legal requirements for doing so were cumbersome. The law stipulated that workers could strike only after meeting several requirements, which included successfully registering a union; exhausting other methods of dispute resolution (such as conciliation, mediation, and arbitration); completing a 60-day waiting period following the emergence of the dispute; conducting a secret ballot in which the absolute majority of union members had to support the strike; and providing seven days' advance notice to the employer and the Ministry of Labor. Strikers could be criminally charged if they engaged in behavior interpreted by local authorities as harmful to public order.

A Ministry of Labor spokesperson stated there was an increase in worker

strikes but a decrease in demonstrations over the first half of the year compared to the same period in 2023. From January to July, there were 63 strikes (a 21 percent increase from last year), while there were only three demonstrations (a 40 percent decrease from last year). The spokesperson added that 90 percent of these strikes and demonstrations were “effectively resolved.” Ministry of Labor officials saw in these numbers a steady decline in strikes and demonstrations over time, which they claimed was evidence of the government’s success in enhancing labor conditions and benefits. A labor rights NGO, however, attributed the decrease in strikes and demonstrations to government restrictions on workers’ ability to organize and demonstrate. In January, 16 trade unions submitted a petition to the National Assembly and the Office of the Prime Minister calling for improved protection of freedoms of association and assembly.

Most strikes throughout the year were in response to unpaid wages and the denial of benefits due to factory closings. In March, 600 workers marched to the Ministry of Labor, demanding their wages and benefits after a Chinese-owned factory declared bankruptcy.

There were reports union leaders and workers were dismissed or convicted on spurious grounds after organizing or participating in “illegal” strikes; since participation in a strike was not in itself legal grounds for dismissal, employers often cited other, thinly supported grounds. On May 3, the Supreme Court upheld incitement convictions for eight NagaWorld union

leaders, confirming a May 2023 lower court verdict and ending the group's last avenue for appeal. Union leader Chhim Sithar was released from prison in September after serving a two-year sentence for leading a union strike over the NagaWorld casino's 2021 dismissal of over 1,300 workers. The other seven union leaders remained free on suspended sentences.

In some cases, employers failed to renew the short-term contracts of union activists who participated in a strike; in others they pressured union personnel or strikers to accept compensation and quit the strikes or even their jobs.

Some union representatives said authorities turned down requests from independent unions for rallies and strikes, citing social order and security concerns. The Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL), a prominent NGO, published a report in June detailing barriers to freedom of association in the country's factories. Shortly after, progovernment unions staged multiple protests objecting to the report's findings. The government also initiated multiple audits that CENTRAL stated absorbed its resources and time, and a CENTRAL program director was charged with criminal defamation for statements he made to media regarding the political leanings of certain trade unions.

At its June session, the International Labor Organization's Committee on the Application of Standards noted with "deep concern" new allegations of abuse violating basic civil liberties, including violence, intimidation, arrest,

and imprisonment of union leaders and members.

On May 8, a Phnom Penh municipal court convicted Morm Rithy of incitement and sentenced him in absentia to 18 months in prison over his 2022 Facebook post criticizing a casino owner in Sihanoukville. Morm was the vice president of the Cambodian Labor Confederation, one of the country's largest labor confederations. A local labor rights NGO called Morm's conviction a clear attempt by the government to influence the labor confederation's internal elections.

As of June, the Arbitration Council, an independent alternative dispute resolution mechanism, heard only eight labor disputes, a 50 percent decrease in hearings compared to the same period in 2023 and continuing a trend in decreased case hearings since the adoption of the 2016 Trade Union Law. The Arbitration Council heard a total of 22 collective dispute cases in 2023, and 53 cases in 2022. Union leaders attributed the decline to more cases classified as "individual" instead of "collective" disputes, making them ineligible for referral to the council. "Individual" disputes could be brought before the courts, which were neither impartial nor transparent. There was no specialized labor court.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The minimum wage covered only the garment, footwear, and textile industries; it was higher than the official poverty level. Union members said, however, that a worker needed approximately \$300 per month on average to cope with rising living expenses, more than the minimum wage of \$204.

The law provided for a standard legal workweek of 48 hours, not to exceed eight hours per day. The law established a rate of 130 percent of daytime wages for nightshift work and 150 percent for overtime, which increased to 200 percent if overtime occurred at night, on a Sunday, or on a holiday.

By law, employees could work a maximum two hours of overtime per day and all overtime had to be voluntary. Forced overtime remained a problem, however, particularly in factories producing for export. Unions and workers reported some factory managers fired workers who refused to work overtime. Workers reported overtime was often excessive; many complained that employers forced them to work 12-hour days, although the legal limit, including overtime, was 10. Workers often faced dismissal, fines, or loss of premium pay for refusing to work overtime.

Workers in marine and air transportation were exempt from limitations on work hours prescribed by law.

Workers and labor organizations raised concerns that rising sub- and short-term contracts (locally known as fixed-duration contracts) allowed firms, especially in the garment sector, to avoid wage and other requirements. Fixed-duration contracts also allowed employers greater freedom to dismiss pregnant women simply by failing to renew their contracts. The law limited such contracts to a maximum of two years, but more recent directives allowed employers to extend this period to up to four years. The Arbitration Council and the International Labor Organization disputed this interpretation of the law, noting that after 24 months an employee should be offered a more permanent “unlimited duration contract.”

Occupational Safety and Health

By law workplace health and safety standards had to provide for workers’ well-being. Compliance with occupational safety and health (OSH) standards continued to be a problem, particularly in the garment export sector, largely due to improper company policies, procedures, and poorly defined supervisory roles and responsibilities. According to unions, some garment factories occupied old buildings that were not built according to OSH standards and subjected workers to a hot, confined, and unsanitary working environment. In January a garment worker died and 20 others were injured in a fire at a factory in Kandal Province.

In addition to reporting OSH concerns in the garment industry, several labor representatives noted that most workers at construction sites and brick kilns

had little knowledge of OSH regulations, nor were systems in place to protect workers from injuries and illnesses or to enable reporting of violations.

Ministry of Labor officials acknowledged that OSH problems remained but claimed the government proactively worked to address those concerns by increasing the Ministry of Labor's capacity to identify unsafe conditions and to respond to workers' OSH complaints, which the ministry stated resulted in a decrease in the number of workers fainting in factories. According to data from the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), during the first six months of the year, there were mass fainting incidents at five sites involving 137 workers, a 400 percent increase from the same period in 2023. Union leaders suggested that the actual number of incidents could have been higher if subcontracted workers, where regulations were inadequate, were included. In June Oxfam reported that subcontractors accounted for up to 30 percent of the apparel industry's workforce.

According to the Ministry of Labor, in the first six months of the year, 138 factory workers were killed and over 1,700 seriously injured in occupational hazards; over 20 percent of these deaths and injuries, however, occurred while workers were commuting to and from work.

By law, workers could remove themselves from unsafe situations without jeopardizing their jobs.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. Although Ministry of Labor inspectors were permitted to conduct unannounced inspections, prior notice was always given to local police and authorities. Outside of the export garment industry, working-hour regulations were rarely, if ever, enforced.

Penalties for OSH violations were rarely assessed and were insufficient to suppress violations. Penalties for violating laws on minimum wage (six days to one month's imprisonment) and overtime (a fine of 31 to 60 times the prevailing daily base wage) were less than those for analogous crimes, such as fraud.

Government inspection of construction worksites was insufficient. The government did not have enough inspectors to enforce compliance. Inspectors had, however, the same status as "judicial police," enabling them to make arrests and build criminal court cases for labor violations.

According to the most recent estimates, the informal sector employed approximately 88 percent of the country's workforce. As of August 26, the NSSF covered nearly 2.7 million members from private and public entities. Including self-employed individuals, the total coverage exceeds 3.1 million members. Members from the informal sector account for around 5 percent of the 2.7 million.

Ministry of Labor inspectors could investigate informal worksites, but finding and contacting unregistered employees was difficult, and investigations usually occurred when the ministry received a complaint; no information on the scale or scope of such investigations was known.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Four years after prominent Thai activist Wanchalearm Satsaksit's abduction in Cambodia in 2020, the government closed the investigation without making any findings, prompting appeals by his family and local human rights defenders for transparency in the investigation and in the decision to end it.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and limited pretrial detention to a maximum of 18 months. The government did not observe these requirements.

As of June, a human rights NGO recorded five illegal arrests and one illegal detention. Human rights NGOs estimated the actual number of arbitrary arrests and detentions was much higher but, due to fear of reprisal, victims

and their families chose not to report incidents.

The government continued to charge individuals with incitement, using the law to levy criminal charges against political opposition leaders and their supporters, labor and environmental activists, and persons who made comments deemed politically objectionable. The law criminalized the “direct incitement to commit a felony or disturb social security,” a vague term commonly used to suppress and punish peaceful political speech and dissent.

Lengthy pretrial detention was common and, in some cases, longer than the minimum sentence for the offense. In addition to systemic delays, refusal to grant bail also contributed to excessive pretrial detention. For example, in cases of incitement, individuals were rarely granted bail, according to reports; most incitement suspects in the country were held in pretrial detention until the end of their trial, almost always beyond the statutory minimum sentence of six months.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State’s annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at

<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports that government officials employed them.

NGOs reported military police and civilian law enforcement officials used physical and psychological abuse, including during interrogations.

A local NGO recorded five cases of alleged torture from January to June involving prisoners, but no cases targeting members of political opposition groups or human rights activists.

Although the law required police, prosecutors, and judges to investigate all complaints of official abuse, government officials and their family members enjoyed impunity for human rights abuses. Judges and prosecutors conducted investigations only when there was public outcry or when a senior government official took a personal interest, and in those in which there were frequent allegations of interference by senior officials. Judges often passed down verdicts in abuse cases based predominately on written reports from police.

There were numerous reports that criminal groups, with the acquiescence of government officials, operated online scam operations to defraud individuals around the world from compounds dispersed throughout Cambodia that held an estimated 100,000 or more People's Republic of China, South and Southeast Asian, and other foreign nationals. Numerous reports indicated widespread trafficking for forced criminality, sex trafficking, physical and sexual abuse, debt bondage, deprivation of food, isolation, and various threats and intimidation occurring within these criminal operations.

Although government officials stated that they investigated some cases of physical abuse in scam compounds, and in one instance reported arresting individuals at the Mango Park compound in Kampong Speu for the alleged physical mistreatment of foreigners, there were no recorded prosecutions of scam compound owners or high-level managers. Observers reported scam compounds often received advanced warning of impending law enforcement actions or were not investigated, and that local police were required to gain prior permission from high-level government officials to enter the compounds, giving the criminal groups time to impede operations and move victims. Victims reported having to pay bribes to the police for their own rescues.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

Child Marriage

The legal age for marriage was 20 for men and 18 for women. Men and women could marry earlier with the consent of their parents if the woman became pregnant before age 18. The government did not enforce the law effectively. Despite an NGO study in 2023 that showed declining child marriage rates, the country had a very high rate of child marriage. The 2022 *Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey* found 18 percent of women ages 20 to 24 were married before age 18; in some rural areas the rate exceeded 30 percent. In partnership with UNICEF and other NGOs, the government conducted campaigns in rural communities to prevent child marriage.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. In August, the government agreed to temporarily accept 300 Afghan refugees while they were being processed for third

country resettlement.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for granting asylum or refugee status, and there was a system for providing protection to refugees. The system, however, was not equally accessible to all refugees and asylum seekers and was not transparent. Observers noted the government failed to interview pending deportees arrested in connection with online scam operations to determine whether they could qualify for refugee status. Asylum seekers who entered the country without documentation or overstayed their visas were vulnerable to deportation. The government did not grant resident status or a resident book to refugees, only a refugee card that was generally unrecognized and did not offer access to employment, housing, banking services, and other benefits to which refugees were legally entitled.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

A small Jewish foreign resident community lived in Phnom Penh. There were no reports of antisemitic incidents.

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

There were credible reports that the government engaged in transnational repression directly and indirectly.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, or Violence or Threats of Violence

There were reports that political activists and human rights defenders endured threats and physical violence while living abroad. Human rights NGOs claimed the Cambodian government was involved in these threats and attacks. According to an NGO, in January unidentified Thai men believed to be acting at the behest of Cambodian authorities assaulted human rights activist Srun Srorn and his coworker when they were conducting a workshop for Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion

The Cambodian government increased threats, harassment, and arbitrary surveillance against political activists and human rights defenders abroad. According to Thailand-based sources, Cambodian officials regularly visited Cambodian diaspora communities in Bangkok to question community members and surveil the homes of political activists and human rights defenders.

Efforts to Control Mobility

There were reports the government, as a form of reprisal, revoked the identity documents of government critics and opposition leaders, thereby blocking their return to Cambodia and other travel. In August the

Cambodian embassy in South Korea threatened to stop renewing the Cambodian passports of persons who joined opposition party-led protests against the government, thereby jeopardizing their ability to hold valid South Korean visas.

Bilateral Pressure

There were credible reports the government exerted direct and indirect pressure on regional countries, seeking repatriation to Cambodia or other adverse action against specific individuals, including six political opposition members and a child who were deported from Thailand to Cambodia in November despite having confirmed or pending UN refugee status.

In December 2023 according to local media, nine small progovernment political parties and 15 government-aligned NGOs asked Thai authorities to act against Cambodian political activists and human rights defenders there. Days later, Thai authorities arrested 10 of them.