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# **Role of Media and Civil Society in a Democracy: A Cambodian Case Study**

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**Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace**

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## About Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP)

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The CICP is an independent, neutral, and non-partisan research institute based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The Institute promotes both domestic and regional dialogue between government officials, national and international organizations, scholars, and the private sector on issues of peace, democracy, civil society, security, foreign policy, conflict resolution, economics and national development.

In this regard, the institute endeavors to:

- ✚ organize forums, lectures, local, regional and international workshops and conference on various development and international issues;
- ✚ design and conduct trainings to civil servants and general public to build capacity in various topics especially in economic development and international cooperation;
- ✚ participate and share ideas in domestic, regional and international forums, workshops and conferences;
- ✚ promote peace and cooperation among Cambodians, as well as between Cambodians and others through regional and international dialogues; and
- ✚ conduct surveys and researches on various topics including socio-economic development, security, strategic studies, international relation, defense management as well as disseminate the resulting research findings.

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The Institute convenes workshops, seminars and colloquia on aspects of socio-economic development, international relations and security. So far CICP has published nearly a hundred books, papers and articles in various development issues and we have affiliated with many regional and global academic network including a regional association of similarly oriented think tanks known as the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), East Asian Development Network (EADN) and Global Development Network (GDN).

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**Abstract:**

Media and civil society have emerged in Cambodia especially during the post conflict time especially after election in 1993 and play more and more important roles in shaping democratization and governance in the country. The roles of media and civil society have recently become the focus of attention and discussion among government officials academia and others. The paper examines and analyzes the roles of media and civil society in the process of democratization and good governance in Cambodia with a focus on achievements and challenges of media and civil society. The paper concludes that the role of media and civil society in promoting democracy is essential for Cambodia. In order to enable the media and civil society to play a critical role in promoting grassroots democracy, it is important to improve the quality of their works including advocacy, poverty reduction, education, production and dissemination of news to promote free and independent media to ensure that journalists understand the importance of democracy human right and press freedom.

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# **Role of Media and Civil Society in a Democracy: A Cambodian Case Study**

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## **1. Introduction**

Cambodia—For more than 30 years, the very name Cambodia has been synonymous with turmoil. Cambodia was a war. Cambodia was genocide. Cambodia was an invasion, an occupation from foreigners and a costly United Nations peacekeeping mission. Cambodia was a tragedy. Cambodia was a problem.

Endowed with rich natural resources, ancient culture and glorious civilization, the country was a glorious empire in the past but later her territory became gradually lost resulting from war and invasion from her neighbors. Consequently, the country remains one of the poorest nations full of problems and tragedy involving war and political strife. The country has experienced tremendous changes in political regimes and history.

Media and civil society have emerged in Cambodia especially during the post conflict time especially after election in 1993 and play more and more important roles in shaping democratization and governance in the country. The roles of media and civil society have recently become the focus of attention and discussion among government officials academia and others.

The paper will examine and analyze the roles of media and civil society in the process of democratization and good governance in the country. Achievements and challenges of media and civil society will be highlighted.

## **2. Democracy in Cambodia**

The word democracy is often heard in Cambodia as “Prachea Thib patey” simply meaning that “taking people to be the boss.” Not many Cambodian people understand in more details the real meaning of Democracy though the term is widely and frequently used. Democracy refers to a system of government by the whole population usually through elected

representatives. It is an egalitarian and tolerant from of society. Democracy can be described more in concepts and scope of activities.

Cambodia has undergone dramatic evolutions in the last ten years. Most significant are the transitions from a centrally-planned to a market economy, from a single-party to a pluralism state, and more recently, the transition from a country in conflict to one which finally enjoys peace and stability. In order to reconstruct the war-ravaged economy, a partnership has been consolidated between government, the private sector and civil society, with assistance and participation from the international community.

Given the extent of the destruction of Cambodia's physical, administrative, and social infrastructure, the country has made remarkable progress in the past seven to eight years. After the 1993 UN sponsored election, democracy in Cambodia has been reinstalled by the new constitution, which has turned Cambodia into a country of free market economy, democracy, pluralism and respect of human right. The coalition government elected by the people's will has reestablished after it disappeared for decades. So far, three General Elections and a commune election (in early 2002), have been held. This will be an important step towards democratic decentralization in this war-ravaged country. The people have freedom of expression; have right to travel, to setup political parties, organizations and right to believe different religions. The government welcomes the participation of media and civil society as its partner and recognizes their roles and activities of in the process of development.

Democracy in Cambodia is newly recognized. People can freely express their idea and opinion. According to a survey conducted by Center for Advance Study and the Asia Foundation, Cambodians feel free to speak their minds about politics, although a significant minority says they still fear expressing their opinions. Some 66% say people feel free to express their political opinions in the area where they live, while only 20% say they feel unable to express their opinions, and 15 % are not sure whether local people feel free to speak out.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Advance Study and the Asia Foundation (2001) Democracy in Cambodia: A Survey of the Cambodian Electorate, Asia Foundation, Phnom Penh, p.21.

### 3. General Concept of Media and Civil Society

#### Media

Media is similar to press and journalism. Media works in gathering, evaluating, and distributing facts of current interest. In journalism, reporters research and write stories for print and electronic distribution, often with the guidance of editors or producers. The earliest journalists produced their stories for news sheets, circulars, newspapers, and periodicals. With technological advances, journalism came to include other media, such as radio, documentary or newsreel films, television, and the Internet.<sup>2</sup>

In Cambodia the term “media” is not very often and widely used and understood as the term “Press.” There is a Press Law in Cambodia but it is not enough to cover all media activities. It will require more related sub-decrees to fill all the gaps that Law can not cover. Media is the main mean of mass communication. Media refers to print media including the press, newspapers and magazines, and broadcasting media including radio and Television, and others such as film, telecommunication and new information technologies, etc that convey information to the public.

Democracy, freedom and social justice are unthinkable without independent media. Pluralism and peaceful cooperation can only be embedded within society, when state, economy and civil society can interchange with each other through the media. There is this saying, that media form the 4<sup>th</sup> power of democratic governance, besides the legislative (parliament), the executive (government) and the judiciary.<sup>3</sup>

#### Civil Society

In Cambodia, the term “Civil Society” (Sankum Sivil) is the new term, which is formed by simple translation of the term “Civil” and “Society” to Khmer. The term is heard and more widely used during the role of civil society become more significant in the 1990s. According

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<sup>2</sup> Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2006. 1993-2005 Microsoft Corporation.

<sup>3</sup> Erfried Adam in his Welcome Address in Conference on Media and Democracy in Asia, Singapore, 27-29 September, 2000, Singapore, compiled in *Asian Media Information and Communication Center (2000) Media and Democracy in Asia*,

to simple implication in Khmer term, it means “non-military society or group”. According to Benjamin R. Barber civil society is the domain that can potentially mediate between the state and private sectors and offer women and men a space for activity that is simultaneously voluntary and offer public a space that unites the virtue of the private sector liberty with the virtue of the public sector concern for the general good. Therefore, we can see that civil society facilitates human activities with objectives and freedom and good relation in society. It is a bridge that links the state’s virtue with tendency toward centralization and private virtue with tendency toward decentralization.<sup>4</sup>

Civil society is a complex contested term, usually referring to all people, their activities and their relationships that are not part of the process of government. It may also be used to cover all processes other than government and economic activity.<sup>5</sup>

Civil Society is societal dwelling place that is neither a capital building nor a shopping mall. It shares with the private sector the gift of liberty; it is voluntary and is constituted by freely associated individuals and groups. But unlike the private sector, it aims at common ground and consensual, integrative and collaborative action. Civil Society is thus public without being coercive, voluntary without being private.

#### **4. Media and Civil Society in a Historical Point of View**

##### **Emerging NGOs**

Cambodia is considered as NGOs’ haven. So far there are about 1900 NGOs operating in the country. According to the Cambodian constitution of 1993, the people have the freedom to establish different forms of associations in the country. The constitution provides the Cambodian people with greater freedom, individual rights, liberty and happiness. Since then, there has been an explosion of NGOs being established in the country. Not only has His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk been supportive of the establishment of NGOs, but other

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin R. Barber (1999) Cited in Chhay Yi Heang, *Civil Society in Contribution to Building of Culture of Peace in Cambodia*, in *Kao Kim Hourn, (edited), (2001) Emerging Civil Society in Cambodia, CICP, Phnom Penh*.

<sup>5</sup> Willetts, Peter (2002), *What is a Non-Governmental Organization?* City University, London

Cambodian leaders have been positive about the work and contributions of NGOs to the Cambodian society. This political will of Cambodian leaders has been an important factor for the proliferation of Cambodian NGOs.

Before 1989, practically everything belonged to the state. Since then, particularly after 1993, there has been an increasing sphere between the individual and the state. Political space has been significantly opened to individuals with greater respect for human rights, democracy, and free press. Not only has political space been opened, the social, legal, and economic arenas have been opened to individuals as well. The State is no longer in control of everything, and the people have been enjoying greater freedom, individual rights and liberty. The civil society has also carved out its own sphere with the speedy proliferation of NGOs and has been an important agent of change shaping Cambodia. The trend toward an expanding sphere between individuals and the state is promising and it is highly likely that the civil society will become increasingly recognized in Cambodia.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to recognize that the Cambodian NGOs have been established mostly in an unplanned manner due to a changing political environment in the country at the beginning of the 1990s and out of a necessity because of the transitional role of the state as Cambodia was going through major transformation and change. Therefore, Cambodian NGOs were established spontaneously and as a reaction to the shifting role of the state.

Most Cambodian NGOs were formed on a voluntary basis, meaning at the initiatives of individuals or groups of individuals who felt the need to contribute in some way to the society rather than at the order or initiative of leaders or state institutions. The NGOs were considered to be an alternative way of contribution to country's development. Although at the time when NGOs were first set up, many were not so sure of their exact role and their real intentions were there. The intentions of most Cambodian NGO leaders were to help contribute to peace-building, nation-building, rural development, poverty reduction, women supporting activities, promotion of human rights and advancement of democracy in Cambodia and others.

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<sup>6</sup> Kao Kim Hourn (2001b)



There was no law and no guidance on how the NGOs should play their role or even what role they should assume or how their activities were to be regulated. Simply put, there was no law. Most Cambodian NGOs wanted to be registered legally and to be recognized, but without constraints on their activities. It is also important to note that Cambodia has been in transition from a centrally planned economy to free market economy, and from a socialist state to a democratic one. In other words, most of the welfare—such as health, education, and other basic support—was no longer provided by the state. Thus, the NGO community actually took over this role from the government as the state ceased to provide any welfare support to the people.

### **From Emergency Relief to Promoting Democracy**

The development of media and civil society in Cambodia is closely linked with the evolution of political and economic situation of the country. Before Paris Peace Agreement in October 1991, Cambodia was in conflict between the ruling government of State of Cambodia and tripartite coalition government (non-communist fighters) along Cambodia- Thai border. Majority of Cambodia territory (about 90 percent) was in the control of State of Cambodia (SOC). Cambodia at that time was in international isolation and economic embargo. The Cambodian seat in the United Nations was occupied by the Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge). External assistance was limited mainly from socialist countries including Vietnam, Cuba and Eastern European countries. There was no assistance from western countries and international community to Cambodia except humanitarian and emergency relief, which were channeled to the Cambodian people through civil society especially NGOs. Most of NGOs at that time were international organization namely Medicin San Frontier (Doctor without border), Oxfam, CARE and other humanitarian organizations. Those NGOs played very active role in providing humanitarian aid and emergency relief to Cambodian people especially in food supplies, medical services and rural development.

Until 1989, after the decline of Eastern Europe and Soviet Union, while Soviet Union introduced Perestroyka policy, Vietnam introduced Doi moi (restructuring), the government of State of Cambodia also initiated the reform policy changing from centrally planned economy toward market oriented economy. More assistance to Cambodia were made through international NGOs both in State of Cambodia's territory as well as in refugee camps along

Thai-Cambodia border under the opposition factions. The international press was welcomed for interview with the Government officials and making report on Cambodia situation.

During that critical situation, with the assistance from international foundations and agencies, media and civil society in Cambodia have emerged rapidly. They become more pro-active in promotion of human right, democracy and governance. There were numerous local and regional debates, dialogues, workshops, conferences conducted by civil society including think tanks on important topics and development issues. As example, only CICP, one of Cambodian civil society (as think tank) during the past 10 years, the institute has sponsored and organized over 100 lectures, workshops, and national and international conferences on topics such as leadership, Cambodia's regional economic relations, foreign policy, security and issues relating to the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), ASEAN and Asia- Pacific issues, poverty reduction, governance, democracy, etc.

The roles of media and civil society at present became more complicated. Some of them used their rights unlimitedly to openly criticize the Government and fully on the opposition side while some were fully behind the ruling party. However, a number of media and civil society were in neutral position and play very active roles in creating conducive environment and constructive intervention for national reconciliation and peacekeeping.

The role of media and civil society is visible as they can successfully perform the tasks in the areas that the government cannot handle. This laid the groundwork for a new era in Cambodia's political, economic and social history. This was a turning point bringing Cambodia away from the preceding dark decades. The culmination of this initial phase of Cambodia's transition into a modern democratic society was the successful undertaking in 1993 of the first national elections in almost thirty years.

### **Young Media in a New Democracy**

The media especially the press in Cambodia, according to my observation, is probably the most liberal in the world. There are about 100 local and international newspapers and magazines, about 20 radio stations, 8 normal TV channels, 2 cable TV companies (receiving about 80 channels from about 30 countries). At least, 6 journalist associations have been grouped for those who are of the same tendency and interest. Cambodian press can issue

articles condemning and insulting government, prime minister, ministers and even the king, the father of the nation, recognized by Constitution.

Nevertheless, there are some cases of suspension of publication and arrests for those who strongly violate the law and deteriorate the national security. There are a lot of cases of conflicts between the press and the Cambodian personalities, which are brought to the court involving defamation and false information. The Cambodian journalists are very brave and industrious with their career. They work in a dangerous way. During the past ten years, at least 6 Journalists were killed secretly without finding out the reasons and many other were threatened with deaths while some of them were jailed.

Media in Cambodia is considered young. The new magazines, newspapers, radio stations, TV channels were approved to set up without restriction and consideration of professionalism. Most of journalists, editor, and reporters were recruited with limited knowledge and training. Most of them are very young. Some of them are influenced by the rich and powerful people. According to an interview by an independent researcher, a senior reporter expressed that “Today, the rich people and the politicians have so much influence and pressures over reporters who are poor and lack conscience. This is very dangerous for the development of grassroots democracy in Cambodia. Cambodian journalists need to have better training, develop conscience, and should earn a little better.”<sup>7</sup>

## **5. Roles of Media and Civil Society**

Media and Civil Society play main important roles as follows:

### **As Checks and Balances with the Government**

In the last decade there has been remarkable acceleration of media and civil society articulations criticizing the existing structures and practices of governance in term of check-and-balance with the government. The civil society that pursue the public interest have proliferated, including not only those advocating the rights of the formerly marginalized or other specific segments of society, but also those that are addressing broader causes, such as environmentalism, that seek to promote the good of society as a whole. The growth of the

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<sup>7</sup> Kao Kim Hourn (2001b)

media and civil society is proof that there exists a rapidly expanding public space that the government is either unwilling or unable to handle. Public issues, such as the environment, rural development, grassroots democracy, human rights etc, are being handled to a significant extent by civil society organizations. Their roles are considered as check-and-balance to the Government to fill the gap between the public and the private sectors.

As the other stakeholders, the media and civil society in Cambodia have been playing significant roles in the process of development and poverty reduction. They are not only the catalyst for democratization and governance but also the bridge to link the public sector and the private sector. But at the same time, it also brings misconception and creates problem to society if there is no legal framework to control their activities. It is very difficult to separate the media and civil society from political tendencies as some of them are linked with political lines in Cambodia. It reflects different perspectives as the government usually accuses the media and civil society, which are believed to have tendency towards opposition parties. Civil society is criticized that it tries to stir the situation, to find fault and to defame the government in order to support opposition parties. At the same time, a number of media and civil society also try to support the government and criticizes the opposition parties.

#### Box 1: Reporting the Watergate Scandal

Headlines from the *Washington Post* call attention to events of the Watergate scandal, which led to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon in 1974. Investigation by journalists helped reveal the extent of the president's involvement in illegal activities and illustrated the importance of freedom of the press in a democratic society.

*Source: Encarta Encyclopedia, The Image Works/Mark Godfrey  
Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2006. © 1993-2005 Microsoft Corporation.*

### **In Capacity Building**

Media and civil society have much influence to the public in term of capacity building. In promoting democracy and governance, media and civil society provide information, knowledge and education to the public. In the case of Cambodia it is very important that the public can access to the information, knowledge and education especially those related to human right, democracy and good governance. As example, according to these roles in participation in the process of election, more and more Cambodian poor people understand

their own right to vote in democratic way to select the leaders they want. More than 90% of eligible voters participated in election.

Media and civil society have the other role to alert policy-makers to an early warning sign of danger so that nobody will be caught by surprise or unprepared to cope with the effects and help society to rise to a higher level of rationality as they reflect on their collective historical experiences. According to this role, many cases have been handled by the government to fight corruption. Many high rank public servants were suspended or sacked from position. As example at least 10 customs officers were suspended from their work when they were found involved in dumping toxic waste in Sihanoukville. Other corrupted and malfunctioned high-ranking officials according to the news published in the newspapers, namely Directors of Departments, a General Director in a Ministry and many others were sacked or suspended from their positions.

Though the media report more bad news than good news, another role of the media is to report on good performance of government, companies and individuals and to support good governance of publicly important matters. This role is very important for Cambodia during the country is still in the early stage of democratization. To report on good things involving with good performance of government agencies and new technology and scientific discoveries will promote optimistic hope and confidence to live in society.

### **As a force of Reform**

At present, media and civil society are playing critical roles in the development of this country along with the government. The civil society certainly includes many different groups namely trade union, political parties, think tanks, and academic institutions. Today, the government, the people and the donor community have recognized their roles. They are very visible in terms of implementing projects and programs throughout the country. While civil society plays different roles depending on the background, missions and objectives of each institution and organization, members of civil society can engage in a wide range of activities including providing relief assistance, capacity building, human rights, democracy, women's issues, socioeconomic development, policy debate, monitoring, advocacy and research.

Cambodian government is very committed to the major reforms from centrally planned economy to the free market economy and the policy of integration of Cambodian economy into the regional and global economies including the entry into ASEAN. These works have required the government to prepare a lot of changes in legal and institutional frameworks to be consistent with the new changing situation. Civil society plays an active role in training programs, capacity building, conducting meetings, round table discussions, workshops, conferences, dialogue, and other consultation means and provides the government with recommendations to propose to the Government for improvements. For example, before adopting the national policies such as the Second Five Year Socioeconomic Development Plan 2001- 2005 (SERD), and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), Law on Press, Law on Land, etc., civil society and think tanks such as CICP have conducted series of workshops to discuss and analyze the Plan, the Paper and those laws and propose recommendations to the Government. The Government has recognized the works of civil society as a force for reforms.

### **In Economic Development**

As the other stakeholders, the NGOs in Cambodia have been playing significant roles in the process of development and poverty reduction. They are not only the catalyst for democratization and governance but also the bridge to link the public sector and the private sector.

A lot of civil societies focus their activities in rural development, rural credit, small business initiatives, health promotion, technical know-how in agriculture and handicraft while some others expand their activities in advocating democracy, human rights, capacity building and education in governance, legal framework etc. The participation of NGOs working at the grassroots level, the think tanks working in research and development, and the media working in dissemination of information, technology and education has a big impact in the process of economic development in Cambodia.

### **In Promotion of Human Right and Democratization**

The term “democratic” is complex and challenging when it is applied to Cambodian media and civil society. Does it mean that when an NGO is set up it must be democratically formed?

Does it mean that the leader or leaders of an NGO must be democratically elected? What it seems to be certain, as referred to earlier, is that most NGOs must be established without coercion, control or manipulation by either political parties or the state. If this is the case, then I would argue that most Cambodian NGOs have been established democratically—without direct control or influence from either political parties or government. But a cautionary note should be added here that there has been in the past few years a tendency in Cambodia to label any NGO or institution once it is formed either as being pro this party or that party. Thus, the issue has to do mostly with perception—how people perceive, label or view a particular NGO or institution. Thus, it is absolutely essential for NGOs to be perceived independent and neutral in a politically polarized Cambodian context.

### **In partnership with Government**

Some civil society organizations including many NGOs and think tanks in Cambodia have been very active in working as partners with the government. They also worked as complementarity to fill some gaps that the Government can not do. As example, think tanks such as CICP, CDRI and others are producing many researches, papers, books on development issues which work as input for Government in shaping its policies including foreign policy, economic and social policies. Frequently, media and civil society have completely different views and positions from the Government and those can create more debates in a democratic ways.

### **As a Watch Dog**

Some Civil Society and Media continue to play a role as a watchdog for the public. Therefore, some media and civil society organizations have conducted their activities with controversial roles that confront with Government's suppression. As example, a radio programme, Beehive Radio Station, headed by Mr. Mam Sonando, has been considered as critical confrontation with the Government, since it established in 1998. Later in 2002, the radio was partly rented by Cambodian Center for Human Right to air regular popular programme of "Voice of Democracy" with a famous human right activist, Mr. Kem Sokha as commentator and facilitator has gained popularity among general population. The program broadcasts the so-called "Public Forum" for all local and grass-root level of people to express their concerns over the human right abuse and violation.

**Box 2: NGOs Criticized as Destabilizing Force**

International non-governmental agencies as a group have drawn criticism for paying high salaries that throw local economies out of balance, for perpetuating their own jobs and missions, and for creating dependency.

In Cambodia, for instance, donors and NGOs have virtually taken over funding for education, social services and rural development, leaving the government free to devote its resources to defense and security, the Cambodia Development Resource Institute notes.

"NGOs can have a destabilizing influence," said Bill Herod of the NGO Forum on Cambodia, a coalition of 60 local and international organizations.

"Schoolteachers with passable English earning \$30 a month can get jobs as drivers for NGOs for \$150, \$180 a month. They they're in the NGO mix and they couldn't get out if they wanted to because they're dependent on the salary.

"All these four-wheel-drive vehicles you see NGOs driving around Phnom Penh cost \$30,000 or \$35,000. You can build three schools for that. Frankly, I think NGOs have gotten a little big for their britches. They need to be more responsive to the people who are putting in the money and more in touch with the realities of Cambodia."

Increasingly Western governments find it more cost-effective to disperse aid through NGOs, rather than to carry out programs themselves.

Medecins San Frontieres, for instance, gets 46 percent of its income from government sources, and USAID--the American government's developmental body--regularly passes funds to the Asia Foundation for distribution to NGOs. Much of the food supplied to needy nations by the World Food Program, a UN body, is actually distributed by NGOs.

"Taking government money robs NGOs of a lot of independence," said a World Bank official who requested anonymity because of the critical nature of his remarks. "The idealism that marked the early days of NGOs has gotten tangled up with commercial and political issues. Obviously if you depend on USAID for your funding, you are, in some respects at least, an instrument of American foreign policy."

*Source: Los Angeles Times--17 November 2000*

<http://www.parish-without-borders.net/cditt/cambodia/ngo-role.htm> accessed at Dec 20, 2005

Another example, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights is a non-governmental, non-political and independent human rights organization founded by Mr. Kem Sokha, who was a Member of Parliament from 1993 – 1998 and Senator from 1999 – 2002. CCHR is registered with the Ministry of Interior in October 2002 and was officially launched on November 12, 2002. As a human rights organization, CCHR tries to respond to all issues related to human rights. However, CCHR's mandate is focused on civil and political rights and political violence. The Center has many programmes including to educate the people on democracy and human rights concepts and principles; strengthen the foundation of democracy at the grass-root level; inform the public in the country and international community of the human rights situation in Cambodia; widen public opinion in support to democracy, human rights and sustainable development; strengthen cooperation with civil society groups working on



reform of laws, governance, and judicial system; reduce incidence of political violence and rights violations. Many times this center is facing threatening and suppression from the Government for its open criticism over corruption, human right violation and other political misconducts.

## **6. Challenges**

### **Lack of Legal Framework**

In Cambodia, as there is no Law on Civil Society including NGOs and media. The press law already passed but with limited contents that provide rooms for misinterpretation. It still requires more related sub-decrees or regulations to cover activities and roles of the media. As results of lack in legal framework, there are many overlapping areas of controlling NGOs in Cambodia. Nowadays, local NGOs can be registered in the Office of Council of Ministers or in Ministry of Interior while international NGOs can be registered in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. At the same time, the Cambodia Reconstruction and Development Board (CRDB) of the Council for Development of Cambodia also has a role to control NGOs in term of aid coordination.

Along with positive roles in promoting society, NGOs also brings misconception and creates problem to society if there is no legal framework to control their activities. They can turn a country in peace into a country with conflict, hostility and mistrust.

### **Political Link with NGOs**

During a democratic and post conflict time, in Cambodia, everything is politics. It is very difficult to separate the media, civil society and NGOs from political tendencies as some of them are linked with political lines in Cambodia. It reflects different perspectives and creates confusion and skepticism in the mind of people. While media and NGOs work as the government's oppositions trying to find faults and criticize misconducts in governance including corruption, crime, drug trafficking, environmental degradation, sexual and gender exploitation and so on, the government at the same time also accuses those media and NGOs, as doing the wrong things and trying to stir the situation, to find fault and to defame the government. There are also a number of media and civil society organization trying to

support the government by issuing good reports on good performance and management of social and economic development. They try to find faults and criticize the opposition political parties as doing wrong.

### **Donors' Influence**

NGOs' role should be independent. But majority of Cambodian NGOs are in lack of self-reliance and funding from local “clean” sources. Therefore, they have to be dependent on other funding sources namely the powerful people including political parties, politicians and the rich. Therefore, they lack independence. Most of them are supported by foreign donors. In order to be attracted in fund, they have to conduct activities with preferences by the donors. Therefore, they are often influenced by donors' policies and positions, such as democracy, freedom and human right are the main's focus of the western countries.

### **National Security Threat**

The definition of national security, political stability and defamation in the Press Law is still the potential threat to the media and civil society in Cambodia. When the Press Law of the Kingdom of Cambodia was adopted on 5 August 1995, it did not contain clear definition of the national security, political stability and defamation. The clear definitions are very important because, according to the Press Law, the government can suspend a publication or even arrest the editor if it threatens national security or political stability. It requires a Sub-decree to give more detail and clear definition so that it will be fair to the press. The Sub-decree on Application of the Press Law was drafted by the Ministry of Information with participation from concerned agencies. But it has been the subject of great controversy and has been the subject of many seminars and debates from civil society to react and provide recommendations to the government in protection of the freedom of expression, which is recognized by the constitution.

### **Lack of Coordination**

Instead of working together in partnership, media and civil society organizations are working in different way and sometime in competition way in order to attract fund and income. Therefore, they find it difficult to work in unity representing their common interest. They

cannot speak in one voice with the government. As example, there are at least 6 journalist associations or groupings and many groups of NGOs. It is very difficult to find a stronger partnership and collaboration among them.

## **7. Conclusion**

External and internal pressures have opened up Cambodian society. Cambodia is no longer the closed society it used to be before 1989. With the impacts of globalization, Cambodia cannot afford to be isolated from the rest of the world. Between the past isolationist policy and the current integrationist approach, it is now clear that Cambodia has opted for integration in the hope that Cambodia will be able to benefit enormously from such an endeavor. Open up Cambodian society will help contribute to the internationalization of the country and bring the young Cambodian generation a step closer to the doorstep of knowledge, skills and information technology.

Cambodian democracy at present is considered as a baby growing up on the daily basis. While Cambodia has experienced some critical challenges such as political instability in the past, the dilemma of mistrust, the lack of serious reforms, and the strengthening of a culture of impunity, the people of this country from every walk of life are committed to democracy but in a gradual steps. They have been very conscious of the mega changes in the region and the world – the wave of democracy and free market economies bolstered by the availability of information, and the impact of globalization. At the same time, since the end of the Cold war, the role of media and civil society has been increasingly recognized.

The role of media and civil society in promoting democracy is essential. In order to enable the media and civil society to play a critical role in promoting grassroots democracy, it is important to improve the quality of their works including advocacy, poverty reduction, education, production and dissemination of news to promote free and independent media to ensure that journalists understand the importance of democracy human right and press freedom.

In order to balance the freedom of expression democracy and the human right as well as national security, media and civil society cannot just be left in the free interplay of the market

forces, but need a minimum of legal and administrative regulations and of a legal framework governing media and civil society and their codes of ethics. The inter-relationship between governments, media and civil society, between media worker and media consumers should be determined in a fair way, and be open to independent judiciary proceedings. Different actors of civil society should have free access to information and unhindered opportunities to articulate themselves.

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