

The Truth About Hun Sen and the Media in Cambodia

Hun Sen's recent comments belie the true relationship that he wishes to cultivate with the media.

By David Hutt January 30, 2020



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Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen seems to have forgotten who he is. Praising journalism and defending reporters? That is not the Hun Sen of yore. Yet this month, amid a trial of two Radio Free Asia reporters on “baseless espionage charges,” according to Human Rights Watch, the prime minister claimed that he is actually a friend of journalists, and what's more, that he wants to become a mentor to reporters when he eventually retires from politics.

“I urge journalists to express themselves without fabricating the truth in their reporting,” he told a conference hall full of reporters on January 14 – the day he celebrated 35 years in power, making him one of the world's longest-serving premiers, a feat not achieved by exalting an independent press. “Ministers must not be afraid of journalists and avoid considering them as enemies,” Hun Sen added.

Later on, he stated: “I give reporters magic powers to extend their professionalism, gain trust from the public and defend themselves before the law. But to make the most of the magic power, don't violate the right of others and don't distort the truth.”

Separately, in a Facebook post also made this month, Hun Sen gave his “thanks [to] all national and international journalists for taking part in disseminating true and positive information on Cambodia, which is a contribution to the national development.”

Is it too premature to assume that Hun Sen isn't sincere? By his emphasis on what sort of reporting he respects, probably not. He appears to think “true and positive information on Cambodia” to be a tautology; news can only be “true” if it presents his government in a “positive” light. That is the veiled message behind his statement. That, then, leads us to understand what he meant by journalists “fabricating the truth in their reporting” – that is, reporting anything that doesn't present the government in a “positive” light. In other words, real news is anything that praises the government; “fake news” is anything critical. Furthermore, note that Hun Sen clearly thinks his government is going to be the arbitrator of what is real or fake. To be sure, one can dismiss these as just being dictatorial sound bites. But what about his appeal for journalists to “work

hand-in-hand with the government to fight injustice for a better society,” as he also said on January 14? Or his pledge that the government will now provide legal assistance to journalists?

Again, there's not much here for independent journalists. Indeed, his appointee to lead this legal aid team is Ky Tech, a former journalist and now head of the Cambodian Government Lawyers Council, and who was richly awarded a ceremonial promotion after he was part of the legal team that forcibly dissolved the country's only viable opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, in November 2017. The new legal assistance program was made even more barefaced when Hun Sen said that the only reporters who could access it are those who “report facts and dispel fake news” – in other words, those who drool over his government. One might also add that main reason why journalists might need legal aid is because of attacks from the government.

Since 2017, the Hun Sen government has neutered independent journalism through bullying and bribery. The *Cambodia Daily*, arguably the most spirited and caustic of the English-language dailies, was forcibly closed down in September 2017 over suspicious tax issues. The story with respect to *The Khmer Times* is yet another illustration of this. Back in 2017, leaked telephone messages between Chen Lip Keong, the Malaysian CEO of NagaWorld, a multibillion dollar casino and the only one allowed to operate in Phnom Penh, and *Khmer Times*' publisher T. Mohan suggested government involvement in the newspaper's funding. The leaks also allegedly involved Hun Manith, one of Prime Minister Hun Sen's sons and director of the defense ministry's military intelligence unit.

And, if rumors speak truth, the prime minister's family also played some part in the fateful takeover of the *Phnom Penh Post*, a once independent daily that saw the majority of its staff quit in May 2018 when it was bought out. Ly Tayseng, who was unveiled as the *Post*'s publisher and CEO – but who was initially presented as just the lawyer of the new owner – has had ties to the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) for years.

To be sure, not all is lost. The *Southeast Asia Globe*, *Voice of Democracy*, and the *ASEAN Today* are still independent publications based in Phnom Penh. Others, like *Voice of America* and *Radio Free Asia*, continue to publish excellent reports. But the majority of the Khmer-language media (most of which are owned by four CPP-connected businesspeople, including Hun Sen's daughter) are little more than government mouthpieces.

Indeed, viewed more broadly, the years between 2016 and 2019 might, by some future historian, be called years of dismantling – not just of Cambodia's two-party political system but also of the independent civil-society that has flourished since the 2000s. But that destruction cannot continue forever; eventually, pieces must be put back together.

And this is what Hun Sen is now trying to do. Indeed, the period from 2020 until 2023, the next general election, will probably go down as the years Hun Sen reconsolidates his power more peacefully. It is also a time of expansion.

Seen from this perspective, right now, Hun Sen doesn't just want to crush independent voices in civil society; he wants to take them over. Indeed, the CPP is transitioning from a political party that dominates the entire state apparatus – the police, army, judiciary, and civil service – to a political party that also dominates the entire public sphere. Hun Sen wants to turn the CPP into a new Sangkum Reastr Niyum, a political party-cum-mass movement run by Norodom Sihanouk that dominated Cambodian politics and society from the 1950s until its ouster in a military coup in 1970. Charles Meyer, a former adviser to Sihanouk, described the Sangkum in his 1971 book *Behind The Khmer Smile* as a “big body in which personal loyalty to [Sihanouk] would serve as doctrine.”

This is Hun Sen's goal, with loyalty to himself as *the* ideology. When the CPP held its "Mass Movement Congress" in December, the party's spokesman Phay Siphon [said](#) it would serve as a "bridge linking the party to all citizens so that they understand our political platform and gain confidence in our leadership." True, the CPP already controlled much of civil society. But now it is expanding its control over the public sphere. Amendments to the trade union law will further strengthen the party-aligned unions; the party has funded new think-tanks and research institutes; and now, its sights are on the media.

Hun Sen's goal, it would appear, is to bring journalists and newspapers into his new mass movement. If reporters prove themselves to be loyal and obedient to him, they will be treated fairly and rewarded generously.

That is why he also [appealed](#) to journalists to "dare to report on all unjust activities in society," but only in a way where they "work hand-in-hand with the government to fight injustice for a better society." They will become useful allies of Hun Sen as he consolidates more power and controls an even greater stake of the public sphere. It is now not so much Hun Sen *versus* The Media, as Hun Sen *with* The Media – a takeover, not an assault.

