



11 June 2024

UNABASHED DICTATORSHIP: CAMBODIA'S HOSTILITY TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTALIST YOUTH



Mother Nature Cambodia trial uses courts to crush environmental protest

If Cambodia believes that peaceful environmental activism is a crime, then it should hold the trial of Mother Nature Cambodia activists in public.

The trial of 10 of the group's peaceful activists started in Phnom Penh on May 29. They face sentences of up to 10 years in prison if convicted.

The government-controlled judiciary is too scared to hold the trial in the open. Media and supporters of the accused have been prevented from entering the court. The justice system is being weaponized to intimidate the population into silence on environmental issues.

Six of the accused have already served prison time for environmental activism before being released in November 2021. The charges against them were never dropped and the conditions of their bail demanded they cease all activism.

This was a standard tactic used by the Hun Sen regime to ensure the silence of the political prisoners who he released. Hun Manet, who took over from his father as prime minister in August 2023, hasn't even released a political prisoner so far.

Most countries would be proud to have an organization such as Mother Nature Cambodia. The organization was given a major international award for its work by Right Livelihood in 2023. Members of the group facing legal action were prevented by Cambodia's courts from travelling to Sweden to receive the award in person.



Environmentalist Youth



Environmentalist Youth

The group's peaceful protests have highlighted issues such as lakes in Phnom Penh being filled in and sold to members of the political elite for real-estate development. People who for decades have relied on lakes such as Boeung Tamok to make a living have found themselves pushed aside.

Lakes furthermore serve as natural reservoirs and their destruction raises the risks of disastrous flooding in the capital. The city's wetlands also function as a wastewater treatment system but have been decimated by the ING City real-estate development. A report by four human rights groups in Cambodia in 2020 found that more than 1 million people in the capital are at increased risk of flooding due to wetlands destruction. In addition, sand dredging being used for infill undermines the stability of the rivers where the sand is sourced.

Stewardship Undermined

The ten activists are Thun Ratha, Long Kunthea, Phuon Keoraksmey, Ly Chandaravuth, Binh Piseth, Rai Raksa, Pork Khoeuy, Yim Leanghy, Sun Ratha and Alejandro Gonzalez-Davidson.

They are charged with plotting against the government, and three of them are also accused of insulting the king based on a leaked Zoom call.

There can be no prospect of them receiving a fair trial given that Cambodia's courts are regularly ranked as among the most corrupt and politically controlled in the world.

Cambodia's Ministry of Interior stripped Mother Nature Cambodia of its officially registered NGO status in 2017. Gonzalez-Davidson, the group's founder, was deported and banned from entering the country in 2015 after a successful campaign to halt a potentially destructive hydropower dam from being built in the Cardamom Mountains.

Persecution of the group has reached bizarre extremes.



In June 2020, members were arrested simply for planning to bicycle from Koh Kong to Phnom Penh and submit a petition to protect Koh Kong Krao island.

The persecution of Mother Nature Cambodia members violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which obliges the protection of fundamental freedoms, and to which Cambodia is a signatory.

Even worse, the court proceedings send a powerful message to the population that attempts to highlight the effects of government policies on the environment will be crushed. The natural role of citizens as stewards of their environment with a stake in its protection is therefore lost, and future generations of Cambodians will pay the price.