



**Cambodia has chance to improve global trade opportunities by dropping Rong Chhun charges**

A Cambodian court summons for Rong Chhun, a former president of the country’s confederation of trade unions, highlights the economic development crossroads which the country now faces.

Rong Chhun, who has been summoned to appear before the courts on 17 January, has played a significant part in developing trade union and human rights in Cambodia. He is also a former president of the Cambodian Independent Teachers’ Association and has served on the country’s National Election Committee.

He was convicted in 2021 for incitement following comments on the demarcation of border posts between Cambodia and Vietnam. His release from prison in November 2021 came after 15 months in prison, and was followed by a three-year probation which ran until November 2024.

Rong Chhun is currently an adviser to the Nation Power Party. In December 2024, Sun Chanthy, the party’s president, was sentenced to two years in prison for incitement. Sun Chanthy has also been stripped for life of his rights to run for election.

These events have taken place in a changing geopolitical context. A second presidential term for Donald Trump in the US creates the risk that aggressive tariffs will be imposed on American imports from China and other countries. This creates both dangers and opportunities for Cambodia. President Trump’s first term opened chances for other Asian countries to replace China as suppliers to the US, a pattern which is likely to be repeated. However, countries which are seen as closely connected with China may themselves risk steep tariffs.

Cambodia at this critical juncture needs to maintain and maximize its access to international markets. The country is aiming to move away from Least Developed Country (LDC) status as defined by the United Nations in 2029. The EU is Cambodia’s second-largest market, after the US. Cambodia has already lost 20% of its preferential access to European markets under the Everything But Arms scheme in 2020, for reasons including the country’s labor rights record.

Trade unions which are respected and protected, and a civil society which is confident in using its freedom of speech, will be key features of future improvement in Cambodian export performance. Major apparel, footwear, and travel brands which source from Cambodia have made this clear. In September, a group of 18 brands urged the Cambodian government to drop its audit of the Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL), and end its criminal case against CENTRAL program manager Khun Taro.

The issue between the Cambodian government and CENTRAL arose following CENTRAL’s critical analysis of the Better Factories Cambodia programme carried out by the International Labour Organization and the International Finance Corporation.

A court decision to respect the political rights of Rong Chhun would have a transformative effect on international perceptions of our country. Cambodia needs to prepare for competition, in which it is capable of succeeding, and not for isolation, in which it would be doomed to fail.

