

Media and good governance : challenge and opportunity

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Media and Good Governance: Challenge and Opportunity
by Leng Sochea, Deputy Director General, Media Center, Minsitry of Information,
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Mr Chairman
Honorable delegates
Dear friends and colleagues
Ladies and gentlemen

It is my great pleasure to participate in the seminar on Media and Good Governance Perspective From Cambodia Lao and Vietnam, sponsored by Asian Information and Communication Center, AMIC in cooperation with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, SIDA.

On behalf of the Media Center, I would like to express my profound gratitude to Mr. Chairman...and all of you for giving me a chance to say some words about the role and challenges of Cambodian Media in the good governance perspective.

As the process of development in Cambodia is moving forwards so fast, the country has paid emphasis on the need of reforms which is accelerated after the country became the last 10th member of ASEAN country. While economic globalization and liberalization are the trend in today word, the private sectors-both local and foreign have been encouraged and play a major important part in Cambodia's macro and micro economics. The Royal Government is conducting the policy to attract more foreign investors into the country. The National Assembly passed the investment law and other legal aspects favorable for the foreign and local business investments. The Cambodian Development Council has been set up aiming to facilitate the business procedures. It created a good and attractive atmosphere for the investments.

Even though there have been developments in the reforming process, but there have been also a lot of concerns as far as the reform is not fast as thought.

It was an unfortunate context that Cambodia just emerged from the more than twenty years of civil war which devastated the country causing poverty among the general population. France who colonized Cambodia did not provide license for the press, Lon Nol regime subjected the press to censorship. Cambodia was a seriously silenced in the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975-1978. It shut down the press just before the genocide. Most of the journalists were executed in the regime. It considered the media as one of its enemies. Few journalists survived the regime

hardly. However in 1980's, the printing and electronic media emerged, it was belonging to the government. It was propaganda for the official line only.

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The free printing media took a quick rebirth, since 1991, under the term of the Paris Peace Accord reached by all of Khmer political factions. The number of printing media sharply increased over 220 just in Five years later. The freedom of press and expression has been guaranteed by the constitution of Cambodia. The young-democratic government which emerged from the 1993 general election sponsored by UNTAC had experienced the free media which were mostly unskilled and unprofessional. Non experienced journalists, amateurs, professor, other intellectuals decided to choose the journalist profession. Defamation and vitriolic verbal attacks against the government leaders were high worried, though the information were unfound or groundless. It seemed a confrontation between the government and the free media, because of irresponsible media. In response to that, The National Assembly passed the bill of Press law in 1995. The publisher or editor in chief must be responsible for what they published. They could not publish any article which would be harm to the national stability and security. As the result three journalists were sentenced to served one year in the prison for defamation of the government, but the three were released under the amnesties of his majesty^{Ha} king. Nevertheless the press law was labeled as one of the freest one in the region when the press law started press could escape identifying its sources even though in the court of law. Nobody would be arrested by expressing his opinion. To ensure the freedom of expression and press, The Ministry of Information in cooperation with UN^{HRC} and local human right organizations and others NGOs has held meeting to make draft sub decree aimed to clearly define some controversial terms in the press law such as press identification, national security and political stability. Despite the problems concerned, the press in Cambodia is actively critical of the government's failure to crackdown the deforestation, logging, corruption, incompetence, boundaries issues, poverty, security problems, Khmer Rouge guerillas, political conflict, illegal drug, child trades etc.... The investigation don^e by the press warned the authority or the government to take immediate practical and legal actions against the problems. The reports always reflects the issues occurring, it means there is a lack of measures to tackle it. In this sense, it helps to provide beforehand warning, before the problem happening.

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Usually any challenges are always followed by good opportunity. It had been better environment for the free media in Cambodia now when the country is moving in the democratic process. By encouraging the freedom of the press and freedom of expression in the country, the government of Cambodia trained spokesmen from every ministries aimed at promoting more communication and avoiding misunderstanding between the media. They would provide more access to the information for the press but the network did not work as well as it is thought yet, because their skills were limited and the bureaucracy is still strong in the country. Practically, when communication is poor, the tension between the media and the government is increasing, because the media seeks any way they can get information to be published, ~~even~~ they were aware that the information they have got is not good enough. Another lesson we have learned in Cambodia was that good cooperation between mass media and the National Election Committee just 30 days before the July 1998 general election run by Cambodia itself provided confidence to the voters and reduced to the minimum of political violence leading to success in the election in which 94 % voters flowed to the polling station in the whole country. The Ministry of Information works directly with the media, Media Center monitor them, but there is no censure before printing, give the license to run the papers, radio and the television station. The center can be considered as source of the information on the activities of the government, the National Assembly and his majesty the king. In Cambodia, Journalists can create the journalist association to protect their interests. There had been two journalists associations, KJA and LCJ set up in the country. They could protect their members in case of the trouble with the government. The association set up the Code of Ethic for the journalists and play a role in short-term training skills in cooperation with the Cambodia Communication Institute, Asia Foundation, Unesco, Danida and other NGOs.

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As you know to achieve the national development, Cambodian government is conducting administration, military, economic, political reforms, the reform required good governance. I think that it is very important role for the independent media to reflect the effectiveness of the reforms. Transparency is necessary in the process. The professional journalists would ~~pay~~ play the role as watchdog in the pursuit of the government's implementation. Their role to monitor the government is inevitable to fight against the corruption and other negatives issues. As the situation of the media

in Cambodia is more improved than before but the need of development in this field is one of the priorities in country. Skills and professionalism for the journalists must be improved. Journalists have to responsibility for their publication. Therefore they could contribute more effectively to reduce negative impact in the governance process. Moreover It is very important to create a good atmosphere in which the government and the media could understand each other and accomplish their roles and duties, based on professionalism and transparency. The atmosphere required a lot of factors both in legal and practical aspects, which could lead to achieve the good governance are to promote more communication, access to information, coverage without fear, to amend press law to provide more transparency, reduce as much as possible the red tape and bureaucracy. To achieve the goal is not so easy, I hope that cooperation between the other countries in the region and NGOs, International Organization; like AMIC, SIDA etc..... would fasten the reform and the national development as well.

Thank you very much for your attention !