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Media and Governance: Opportunities and Challenges
The Cambodian Experience Presented by the Cambodian Private Newspaper Reasmey Kampuchea’s Deputy Director Khieu Navy in the seminar on Media and Governance in Vientiane, LPDR, from November 10 to 12, 1999.

Distinguished Chairman,
Dear Media Professionals,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed my great pleasure and honor today to have the opportunity to meet and to share with all of you for a participation in the discussion about media and its role in governance, which I think is a crucial and timely topic for the epoch at the very end of the 20th century and at the start of the new millennium.

Cambodia has evolved through, in the past decades, various kinds of political regime, sometimes with a totally different ideological leadership by nature and characteristics. In its so unique history, when some one came to power, indirectly or directly, the media is being used as instruments for clinging on to power. Consequently, the media has from one regime to another changed its role in face of political pressures.

Thanks to the Paris Peace Agreement and the true and willful intention of the people in power to put Cambodia on track to democracy and human rights, two general elections had been held in 1993 and 1998. Now that the second term Government is being led by only one Prime Minister, it is easier for the media and the public to reflect accountability in the country's policy making and implementation. The Cambodian Government, based on the country's constitution written in 1993. solemnly abides by the principles of democracy with respects of basic human rights, and based upon which the Cambodian media is fully recognized and given a vital role of the fourth power institution.

Dear Media Professional,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

From own record of events in Cambodia, you may have learnt that we have just gone through a turmoil and fragile situation prior to the second elections, and that we are again moving to the set goals and objectives. There would be plenty of challenging situations in the country's efforts to achieve a democratic political system and development, while both the Government and the media are freshly new to this concept and the way how to conquer it. This situation is quite dangerous for the media and/or the Government to misunderstand each other's role and intention causing them to derail from constructive to narrowly-interest-led dialogue which could lead to a disaster for the country.

Theoretically one could look into many angles in order to have a better picture of governance, but of the many issues deriving from the good governance agenda, in the above situation of Cambodia, one should prioritize what could be achieved first, and what criteria will take shape later. After the 1993 elections and setting up of the legal and pluralistic Government, the media enjoys exercising their flourishing freedom of speech which they, for those who used to work in this field prior to the elections, never had.

Most of them, privately owned press, apply a one-way communication method in their day to day activities. Either they disseminate information about the Government policy or the reaction from the people to it, but never they try to put the two together for the benefit of the country's stable
and constructive development. Using this way of communication, the media could rarely present
the right picture of problems that people encounter in their daily lives to the Government. Things
like what type of problems are there in the community? what need to be done? what has been
done by the Government, and what else need to be improved? and how the Government can
improve its leadership and management? have been neglected.

Based upon the previous experiences, however, in recent years, the media has re-oriented its
activities by experimenting a model of participatory communication. Having used this method of
work, the media has become a catalyst of change through the people's participation and
expression of their opinions, and the Government's flexible re-adjustment of its policy.

Let me give you an example here. Not long ago Reasmey Kampuchea newspaper - I mention
again that it is a private newspaper - issued an article about a negative impact upon the river as a
result to the dumping of toxic waste by a factory. Reading the newspaper, people in the affected
community learnt about their problem. After discussing among themselves, they brought the
issue to respective Government institutions for urgent solution. Seeing the situation had
developed into this stage, Reasmey Kampuchea issued another long article reiterating the
Government policy vis-a-vis environment and presenting in it the affected community's opinion.
The article clearly demonstrated that what has been set as a policy by the government is
irrelevant to what has been done.

Our Prime Minister, who always skims all newspaper, learnt about the problem, and the
mismanagement from the part of the Government had offered to order investigation for
appropriate measures to be taken. As a result, not long after this article went into public
attention, the Government officials, some might have been bribed, concerned could not pretend
to be ignorant or irrelevant, and dared not prolong the realization of a solution. In the end, the
factory owners were strictly held accountable to the issue and had purchased equipment to clean
the waste before releasing into the river.

Dear Media Professionals,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I mentioned earlier, Cambodia has just gone through a long protracted war. The recent end of
war notices the remaining of violence and impunity. Not only the politicians that receive threats
for life, and some even had been wounded or killed, but also a number of journalists had been
targeted victims too. What is worst is that the competent authority rarely discovers who those
criminals are to be brought for justice.

Still to be worried about is the corruption and bribery which deteriorates the effectiveness of law.
Hence, the media has to increase its role in the dissemination of information allowing for a two-
way communication for the sake of eradicating violence, rights abuses, and of educating the
people at all level about the respect of law.

To take up this challenge, according to my experience, there are three measures that could be
taken. Firstly, we disseminate law materials through our publications. Secondly, we write and
inform the public about the arrest of criminals with an aim to show them that those who goes
against the law would have to bear such a consequence. Last, we carry in our newspaper the
opinion or suggestion of the audience about the trial whether it is just or unjust, and/or if it is
being handled in protection of the interest of the people in power.
Let me take an example here. Conflict on land issue -- between those people in power and those are peasants -- occur almost every day. The issue have been brought by the people to the National Assembly through demonstration.

So far, some newspapers write and publish this problem almost every day. Some cases had been or are being solved, while some others are not due to the conflict involve senior people in power. One interesting point here is, however, that sometimes we see our Prime Minister's instruction written on or next to the published article ordering investigation or inspection for an appropriate solution to be taken. We have also noticed that some Ministers are also using this working manner. Though this could help speed up the solution per se, but to make a country rule of law, one could see that this does not bear a nature of a strategic approach to get the problem by its root.

What could be more important is to make the issue clear across the board that no matter who and/or how much power one could have can not be above the law. Those who abuse the law have to be punished.

At the same time, to increase the Government apparatus's transparency, the media in Cambodia together with extensive and effective civil society's participation should concentrate on diversifying opinions about the establishment of a national mechanism for combating the problem of corruption.

**Dear Media Professionals,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Personally I think that in order to help improve good governance, the media has to increase its effort in disseminating information with educational nature to the audience about democracy, law and respect for human rights. Equally important it has to help the audience acquire an appropriate level of understanding of the Government policy -- like, what has the Government achieved from its policy? what does it still have to achieve? which part of policy is appropriate or positive, and which part is irrelevant? and what can be done to improve the process? Setting this as an objective, the media has to assure the Government that it is functioning as a partner who could help the Government to move close or right through to effective good governance.

Using term "partner" -- let me clarify that I mean the media is independent and does not trot along in the path same with that of the Government. We should belong to two different paths. The media should continue to improve its role as a reflective mirror to the Government actions so as they could see to themselves their strong and weak points as reflected in the people's reaction.

In practice, the issues that I have brought up here today, have significantly and consistently been dealt by the media. We have to be realistically proud of the achievement scored so far despite the condition of a protracted war of more than 20 years just ended, and the bud of democracy has just taken shape in the past six years.

I still have a strong confidence that if the Government apparatus is willing to make itself accountable, transparent, and respect the rule of law and human rights, coupling with the increase of professionally responsible role of the media, there are more chance for the country to achieve a satisfactory level of good governance.
Dear Media Professionals,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I think I have come to the end of my brief presentation. I hope the idea I have just shared with you all are not too messy for the participants to understand, though, I am sure, talking about one country's experience in twenty minutes is always a challenge itself. I am looking forward to sharing more information and thinking with all of you, in a formal and non formal fora about any topics that are relating to the media.

In the course of this very important and fruitful seminar, I will be more than happy to note down profound experiences of the issues to be presented by our media professionals from Laos and Vietnam, and other keynote speakers.

Once again, let me take this opportunity to profoundly thank AMIC for the brilliant concept and effort in making this important and useful seminar possible for all of us, myself included, to possess this wonderful chance for an exchange as a catalyst for change in pursuit of the media vision on good governance in the coming 21st century./.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.