

**Fact Sheet:** Fundamental Freedoms Series: Internet Censorship

**Fundamental Freedom:** Freedom of Expression



**CCHR Concern:** Recent moves to block certain websites reflects the inability of the Royal Government of Cambodia (the “RGC”) to accept any criticism, however constructive, and heralds the extension of government censorship to the Internet. These reported attempts at censorship confirm the RGC’s commitment to controlling new media just as it now controls traditional media.

### Introduction

This fact sheet gives an overview of Internet penetration in the Kingdom of Cambodia (“Cambodia”), the recent trend towards Internet censorship, and the grave implications for freedom of expression in Cambodia. This fact sheet is written by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (“CCHR”), a non-aligned, independent, non-governmental organization (“NGO”) that works to promote and protect democracy and respect for human rights – primarily civil and political rights – throughout Cambodia.

### Internet penetration

According to the World Bank, Internet penetration in Cambodia increased tenfold from 0.05% in 2000 to 0.5% in 2010, thus underlining its growing importance and giving the RGC cause for concern. However, the vast majority of Cambodian citizens – who for the most part live in poor rural areas – still have no access to the Internet. The RGC should do its utmost to develop mechanisms to increase Internet penetration in Cambodia, since everyone should be able to access the Internet.

### Internet censorship

The RGC has now turned its attention to the Internet as a new front in its war on freedom of expression in Cambodia. Recently, several incidents of website blocking have been reported:

- Towards the end of January 2009 access to “Khmerican” artist Koke Lor’s website was blocked after controversial artwork depicting semi-naked Apsaras – female Khmer folk-tale figures – angered the Ministry of Women’s Affairs.
- On 8 February 2009, access to UK-based corruption watchdog Global Witness’s website was also blocked on the Internet service provider (“ISP”) AngkorNet, following the organization’s release of a scathing report – “*Country for Sale*” – on Cambodia’s nascent oil and mining industries. Officials denied any knowledge of the blocking.
- On 19 January 2011 BlogSpot sites in Cambodia were blocked following an order from the Ministry of Interior (the “MOI”) to all Cambodian ISPs. Users of EZECOM, one of the growing numbers of ISPs, complained that they were unable to access a number of sites, including KI-Media, a website critical of the RGC, although EZECOM management later denied in writing that it had received any directive from the RGC. Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith also denied involvement. Soon afterwards, service was restored for all ISPs except Metfone.
- In early February 2011 Cambodia suffered a new wave of outages, again affecting KI-Media, in addition to Khmerization – a citizen-journalist blog often critical of the RGC – and the blog of Khmer political cartoonist Sacrava, among others. *The Phnom Penh Post* reported that when WiCam (one of the ISPs affected) customers attempted to access KI-Media, they saw a message stating that the site had been “*blocked as ordered by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications of Cambodia*”. An unnamed WiCam employee told the newspaper that the ministry had ordered KI-Media be blocked because it “*impacts the government*”.

- On 16 February 2011 *The Phnom Penh Post* revealed that an e-mail was leaked from a senior official at the MOPT. The e-mail congratulated ten ISPs, including EZECOM, for blocking access to a list of websites, including BlogSpot sites, KI-Media, Khmerization and Sacrava, all of them well-known for propagating information critical of the RGC.

Furthermore, in October 2009 the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (the “MOPT”) planned to create a state-run Internet hub that would control and monitor all Internet traffic, giving it free reign to block websites that it deemed “inappropriate”, but this initiative was eventually scrapped as it received no support from the information technology and business sectors. However, the MOPT has hinted that new licensing requirements might be developed in the future. It is also rumored that the RGC is considering new legislation to regulate the Internet, as currently it is the only form of media not regulated in any form.

### Freedom of expression

Cambodia’s freedom of expression record is poor, despite its being enshrined in both domestic and international law by virtue of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Cambodia has ratified. The most recent Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders ranks Cambodia a dismal 128th out of 178 countries. The RGC maintains a tight grip on television, radio and printed publications. The new Penal Code contains nine provisions criminalizing various forms of expression, while pending laws regulating (i) unions and (ii) NGOs and associations threaten to erode further the right to freedom of expression.

### Conclusion

To what extent Internet freedom of expression will be curtailed remains unclear. While thus far there has been relative freedom in engaging with new media – suggesting that the RGC may have struggled with the technology required to censor the Internet – the recent blocking of websites has raised serious concerns that censorship of the Internet is quickly becoming a reality in Cambodia. Recent events across the globe have shown that new media has proven to be a dynamic force for positive change – in many instances exhibiting remarkable resilience in the face of state censorship – and the RGC has no doubt taken note. As Cambodia stands at a crossroads in terms of how the RGC will respond to opinions exercised through new media, it is vital that the RGC recognizes that it is only by joining the online dialogue and by responding to criticisms with reasoned arguments that it can hope to address the criticisms that it seeks to suppress.

CCHR calls on the RGC to develop mechanisms to increase Internet penetration in Cambodia, to reject the Internet censorship policies which it currently appears to be adopting, and to promote online space for free expression by ensuring that old barriers are not applied to new frontiers. CCHR encourages Cambodia’s Internet users and new media innovators to continue to use and open up new areas of media to allow for debate and discussion, and hopes that the RGC will continue to embrace new media by joining the online dialogue.

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