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Cambodia: Baseless conviction of government critic reflects shrinking space for free speech

The shocking and baseless conviction of government critic Mam Sonando reflects the deteriorating situation of freedom of expression in Cambodia, Amnesty International said today, after the Phnom Penh Municipal Court found Mam Sonando guilty of anti-state offences including instigating “insurrection” and sentenced him to 20 years in prison.

“This verdict is inexplicable. No evidence was presented at the trial that proved that insurrection actually occurred or that Mam Sonando was involved”, said Rupert Abbott, Amnesty International’s Researcher on Cambodia, who attended the journalist’s trial and today’s verdict hearing.

Mam Sonando, 71, is a prominent journalist and the owner of Beehive Radio, one of Cambodia’s few independent radio stations. He is also the head of the Association of Democrats, a popular non-governmental organization that he founded to promote human rights and democracy.

His conviction stems from a speech made by Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen on 26 June 2012, in which he accused Mam Sonando and members of the Association of Democrats of being behind a plot for Pro Ma village in Kratie province to secede from Cambodia.

Hun Sen’s speech came soon after Beehive Radio broadcast a report about a complaint lodged in June 2012 at the International Criminal Court that accuses Cambodia’s government of committing crimes against humanity by displacing thousands of people through forced evictions.

“In form, Mam Sonando’s trial appeared quite fair; but today’s verdict shows that, in reality, it is business as usual and Cambodia’s courts are not independent from the executive”, said Abbott.

“Mam Sonando is a Prisoner of Conscience, convicted and imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression through his radio broadcasts, and Amnesty International will be campaigning strongly for his release.”

The community at Pro Ma, accused of trying to secede from Cambodia, had been involved in a long-running land dispute with a rubber company. But the authorities used the alleged secessionist plot as a pretext for the violent eviction of the community in May 2012, during which security forces shot dead a 14-year-old girl.

Today, Monday 1 October, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court also convicted three community activists in absentia and handed them sentences from 15 to 30 years for anti-state crimes, while three Pro Ma villagers were convicted and sentenced to up to five years in prison. Seven more villagers, including those who had responded to a government offer of leniency in exchange for implicating others, were convicted

but had their sentences suspended.

“This unbelievable narrative of secession has been used to silence dissent”, said Abbott.

“Today’s convictions mark a disturbing deterioration in the situation of freedom of expression in Cambodia”, he said.

The year has so far seen human rights defenders and peaceful protesters in Cambodia, including those taking action to save their homes and land, face increasing harassment, legal action through government-controlled courts, and violence including killings.