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EU Adopts Resolution Against NGO Law

BY KUCH NAREN AND COLIN MEYN | JULY 11, 2015

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on Thursday calling on the Cambodian government to cancel a draft law that would strictly regulate NGOs and associations in the country, warning that its passage could cost Cambodia up to \$700 million in development aid.

The National Assembly’s permanent committee, however, met Friday and decided to place the draft NGO law on the agenda for a plenary session of parliament scheduled for Monday, during which the law would be passed, a CPP spokesman said.

The E.U. resolution “Urges the Government of Cambodia to withdraw the draft LANGO [Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations].” It says the law is overly restrictive, open to abuse by the government, and conflicts with both Cambodia’s Constitution and international obligations protecting freedom of expression, assembly and association.

“[I]t is expected that the country will lose USD 600-700 million in development projects annually once the law has been passed.... LANGO would place restrictions on budgets, which would threaten the capacity of international NGOs to run cost-effective projects,” the resolution says.

“[S]everal renowned NGOs have pointed out that LANGO follows previous attempts, later withdrawn in response to domestic and international opposition, to enact a law that would impose unwarranted restrictions on the rights to freedom of association and expression and create legal grounds for arbitrarily closing or denying registration to politically disfavored NGOs, including those employing human rights defenders.”

The E.U. in its resolution also called for the withdrawal of a draft Trade Union Law, which labor advocates say will have a similar chilling effect on the country’s labor movement. “[T]he draft law governing trade unions would violate the right to organize and would severely limit the rights of independent trade unions, including existing unions,” it said.

Alain Vandersmissen, charge d’affaires of the E.U. delegation in Phnom Penh, said in an email that the resolution “is an additional important element in the debate on LANGO that has started too late and remains so far very limited.”

“As we have already said, the E.U. hopes that the authorities will give more time to consultations. Cambodia has still the golden opportunity to produce a much better law and, by doing so, to show internationally its democratic evolution,” he said.

Phay Siphon, spokesman for the Council of Ministers, which approved the draft NGO law and sent it to the National Assembly last month, said that the E.U.’s resolution was an obvious threat and an inaccurate interpretation of the draft law.

“It’s a wrong interpretation, it’s misleading,” Mr. Siphon said of the resolution, adding that the warning about Cambodia losing development aid was “unfair.”

“It’s unfair that they use that as a weapon to scare Cambodia to affect its own independence and sovereignty,” he said. “I feel that we are free, we are independent from another state, and we are not under any colony. We feel sorry that anyone puts our country under any pressure.”

A statement from the National Assembly’s secretariat general, released following a meeting of parliament’s 13-member permanent committee on Friday, said the draft NGO law would be on the agenda during a full session of parliament this coming week.

“The meeting approved adding the draft Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations into the agenda for the National Assembly’s fourth plenary session in the fifth mandate,” which is set for Monday, the statement said.

Eng Chhay Eang, a CNRP lawmaker on the CPP-majority permanent committee, said that despite opposition objection, ruling-party lawmakers decided to push ahead with putting the draft NGO law up for a vote.

Mr. Chhay Eang, the head of parliament’s human rights commission, said opposition lawmakers would boycott the session.

“This draft NGO law is very controversial, and further thorough consultation is required, that is why the four CNRP lawmakers at the permanent committee meeting didn’t support the vote for the law to be brought for approval at the plenary session scheduled for Monday,” he said.

“It’s rather logical that we CNRP lawmakers do not support this law, so our CNRP lawmakers will not go to attend Monday’s plenary meeting.”

CPP spokesman Sok Eysan said the opposition boycott would not deter the ruling party from passing the law.

“It is the right of opposition lawmakers to boycott the National Assembly’s plenary meeting, nobody dares touch them,” he said.

Asked if CPP lawmakers would pass the law on Monday, Mr. Eysan said: “Of course, it will be approved.” Courtesy the Cambodia Daily



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