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WORLD AFFAIRS COUNCIL OF DALLAS/FORT WORTH

JWAC Lesson Plan

Cambodia: A Case Study on Press Freedom

By: Noah Carr, June 2018

Warm up: *Are you familiar with the country of Cambodia? What do you know about the history of Cambodia and Southeast Asia?*

Fast Facts:

- The Largest Religious Structure ever built (the Angkor Wat) is in Cambodia
- Despite technically being a republic, Cambodia has a monarchy
- Majority Buddhist country; 97% of the country is Buddhist

Discussion: At one point, similar to its neighbors, Cambodia was a communist nation in south east Asia. A nation with a long and proud history, during the 12th and 13th centuries Cambodia was the Angkor Empire, a great power in its region. Wars with its neighbors from that point on would continue weakening Cambodia until France colonized it, followed by Japan, until it achieved independence after World War 2. Following several bombing raids during the Vietnam War by the US, the Khmer Rouge, a communist group, took control of the country and killed roughly a quarter the country's population. Eventually, Cambodia was invaded by Vietnam in preemptive strike that caused the Khmer Rouge fall and flee the country. Since then, Cambodia has become a kingdom with elections to its parliament. Its current leader, Hun Sen, has ruled for the last 33 years and plans to hold power until the age of 74.

Case Study: Hun Sen's War on the Media

Background: In 2004, by request of the Cambodian king, a private newspaper was created to report on the nation. The newspaper, the Cambodian Daily, proved to be a landmark for Cambodia and exposed corruption and scandals throughout the nations for several years. Coincidentally, the first private newspaper also ended up becoming one of the last private newspapers left during the government's closure of private news sources. The Cambodian Daily used all excess profits to fund schools and hospitals, so when the Prime Minister fined it in 2017, it went bankrupt almost immediately. In 2018, the newspaper regraded as the last truly independent newspaper, the Phnom Penh Post, declared bankruptcy and was acquired by an associate of Hun Sen. Hun Sen has not only attacked newspapers, but also radios, shuttering popular radio stations like Radio Free Asia.

Video: <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2018/02/cambodia-media-blackout-design-180203111514747.html>



Discussion:

How might the decline in press freedom in Cambodia affect the rest of the region? Why do you think Cambodian citizens have allowed their press freedom to decline? What are the consequences of suppressing free speech and press? Do you think Hun Sen will maintain his grip on Cambodia?

Activity:

Have students write down the top ten countries they believe have the most press freedom. Then, ask the students to write down the top ten countries they believe have the least press freedom.

Students should justify their choices in an open discussion.

Refer to the following website: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

Ask students if the countries they had matched up with the ones on the list. Were there any surprises? If so, what were they? What signs can be used as predictors for press freedom? Why is the US only at 45 despite the 1st amendment?

Recap and Reaching Further:

Cambodia has had a painful history. It has been a colony twice and has been ruled by a repressive communist government. Cambodia has gone under a genocide under the Khmer Rouge and its leaders have often been totalitarian. After 33 years under Prime Minister Hun Sen, the Prime Minister is progressively curtailing press freedom and using social media to spread his message instead. Cambodia lost 10 places on the reporters without borders annual ranking in 2018. *How might Cambodia's recent history have shaped its future? How do restrictions on the press benefit Hun Sen's government and his goals?*

The Freedom of the Press has been enshrined in the first amendment for citizens of the United States. Sometimes it may seem like there are too many news sources for Americans to choose from. It is hard to believe that there are places where even the radio is closely watched by the government. Some of the world's deepest rooted dictatorships are in places where there is no press freedom to speak of. When nations lack press freedom, it becomes easier for corruption to take hold of both that nation's public and private sector. The importance of press freedom cannot be overstated, and that is why it is so important to both appreciate available news sources as well as stay well versed in matters of press freedom.

Cambodia is not the worst of among nations in press freedom violations. There are several nations with extreme internet censorship as well as press censorship. Reporters without Borders reports that, out of 179, Cambodia ranks at 142, meaning there are 37



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countries with situations as bad or worse such as North Korea, Turkmenistan (see the Turkmenistan Lesson Plan), and Eritrea rounding out the bottom of the list.

Call to Action: One way you can help the people of Cambodia is to stay informed. Keep an eye on Cambodia as well as the rest of the regions developments here: <https://www.seapa.org/category/country/cambodia/>

Reporters without Borders maintains a page on press freedom in Cambodia, with petitions, articles and videos. Find the page here: <https://rsf.org/en/cambodia>

Almost as dangerous as the shuttering of private news sources is “Fake News,” which can be used to subvert democracies by pushing biased and misleading stories. Often times, as power of private news sources decreases, Fake News rises as result. Learn how to differentiate between “Fake News” and trustworthy media sources here: <https://www.common sense media.org/news-and-media-literacy>

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