

Forum on: Prospects for the Establishment of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) in Cambodia

Executive Summary

More than 40 Cambodians and international experts came together to discuss perspectives on promoting independent media in Cambodia at the forum on "Prospects for the Establishment of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB)" in Phnom Penh at the 18th of January, 2012 organized by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Background

PSB serves as a public institution that educates, informs, and entertains the public, shapes public consciousness, and acts as a forum through which the public can voice their opinions and participate in socio-political debates. PSB can be of great value to citizens who are willing to engage in policy making processes and political discussions in a democratic society. Such an independent media as PSB has never existed in Cambodia, which makes it hard for Cambodian people to receive impartial news and programs, to voice their opinions, and to participate in policy formulation and implementation. While Cambodian citizens badly need this kind of platform, the prerequisites for the establishment of PSB have not yet been well developed.

Although the broadcasting industry in Cambodia has recently been growing significantly, its program quality is still low. Television stations are not editorial independent. Three types of broadcasting – private, state, and political party – are found in Cambodia. No independent type, such as community broadcasting and/or PSB has yet been established in Cambodia.

Cambodian broadcast media has been facing three immediate challenges: (a) political influences, (b) a shortage of financial resources and (c) the absence of broadcast laws. The absence of broadcast laws and the presence of financial problems are directly related to the country's politics and the economy: the political system determines the possibility of enacting broadcast laws and favorable economic conditions create the broadcast market, from which

broadcasters could generate their incomes. In addition, due to the absence of broadcast laws, the government has used the law on press regime, adopted in 1995 to ineffectively regulate broadcasters. The 1995 Press Law does not cover program policy, airwave regulation, and broadcasting license procedures, which are important elements of broadcast laws. In the absence of these elements, it is almost impossible to use the Press Law to regulate broadcasters. Thus, the government regulates broadcasters based on decisions and/or sub-decree by the Ministry of Information.

Like other emerging democratic countries, Cambodia's political pluralism is not yet well developed and the notion of the media as society's watchdog is not well understood by the government or even by many media practitioners themselves. Therefore, this forum on prospects for the establishment of public service broadcasting is an important starting point for promoting PSB among policymakers, media practitioners, and other actors in Cambodia.

About the Forum

The forum was organized by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung on 18. January, 2012 at the Inter-Continental Hotel in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Mr. Denis Schrey, country representative of the foundation emphasized the importance of PSB as a fundamental component of the media landscape in democratic societies as it would set a standard for high quality and balanced journalism. Furthermore, he explained that public service media would have a genuine editorial independence and institutional autonomy which would help to counterbalance the risk of misuse of power in a situation of strong concentration of media. Besides providing news and entertainment and supporting cultural preservation, PSB could play an important role in fostering a country's educational standards and could furthermore contribute indirectly to poverty alleviation. He concluded that Cambodia would have to find its way to establish an independent, high quality PBS system in the future and that KAS would be likely to support and facilitate the long term set-up process.

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The keynote speaker was Dr. Im Sothearith, who conducted his doctoral dissertation research on "A Public Service Broadcasting Model for Developing Countries: The Case of Cambodia." He explained his findings on the prospects for the establishment of Public Service Broadcasting in Cambodia.

He found that it is hard to set up a PSB system in Cambodia where politics is dominated by a single party oligarchy, the economy is weak and underdeveloped, civil society institutions have yet to take strong root, and where there is no tradition of popular participation in decision making. These four factors create conditions in which the media are dependent and vulnerable to manipulation by political and commercial influences. Cambodia, at this stage, lacks the prerequisites for a PSB system even though an independent broadcaster of this sort is badly needed to promote democracy, human rights, rule of law, social justice, and socio-economic development.

He said that four external factors – political circumstances, economic conditions, civil society, and socio-cultural compatibility – would play an important role in creating the conditions for introduction of a PSB system in a developing country. Among the four factors, politics would be the most important. With political will, funding would not be difficult to obtain because a small tax on particular products would be adequate for the funding of a PSB system. If revenues from such a tax were available, there would be no need for a license fee, which is a classic source of revenue for PSB. With a certain percentage of the proceeds from this tax transferred directly to the PSB account, it could be independent from outside influences.

These findings were reinforced by the managing director of Thai PBS Mr. Thepchai Yong, who addressed the challenges and experiences of establishing the Thai PBS. During the forum, he outlined the organizational structure, governing bodies, programming, and the role of Thai PBS in Thai society.

He said PSB could play the role of a watchdog without political and/or commercial constraints faced by its commercial counterparts. In this respect he said that Thai PBS would carry out the mission of a public broadcasting service in promotion of good governance, especially transparency and accountability in both, the public and private sectors. He added that Thai PBS would consider creating an informed citizenry - a key ingredient of democracy. Thai PBS began broadcasting in January 2008 in the midst of Thailand's worst political crisis and defied skeptics. In less than two years it had already earned a distinctive place in the Thai broadcast industry with bold and independent news reporting and a wide range of thought-provoking and knowledge-building programs.

Other speakers included lawmaker H.E. Dr. Cheam Yeap of ruling party CPP and chairman of the National Assembly's Commission of Economy, Finance and H.E. Him Suong, Under Secretary of State of Information.

Among the participants were representatives of political parties – CPP, FUNCINPEC, Norodom Ranaridh, Sam Rainsy, and Human Rights – international NGOs, UN organizations, foreign government representatives, academics, human rights activists, media practitioners, students, and observers.

The objective of the forum was to promote the concept of PSB and seek feedbacks from participants in order to find a common ground for the creation of PSB in Cambodia. In order to establish PSB in a developing country, such as Cambodia, the concept of PSB must be explained and promoted among policymakers and the public. In Cambodia, a lack of understanding regarding PSB's important role in advancing socio-economic development, strengthening democracy, enhancing social justice, and expanding freedom of expression and the presents a major challenge. Many public actors and most policymakers, media practitioners, and civil society representatives in Cambodia are hardly aware of the concept and existence of PSB. Therefore its concept must be explained access to the public must be created. Thus, this forum was a first step to raise awareness and knowledge on the benefits of PBS.

The Main Recommendations Outlined at the Forum

Education

Educate the public about the importance of PSB. Once public actors and policymakers understand the PSB concept, they will be in a better position to rally support and encourage the government to consider creating a PSB system that is owned and run by the public and that serves the public interest. When policymakers, especially government officials, understand the PSB concept clearly, they may no longer see PSB as being harmful to them, but rather view it as an aid to policy formulation and implementation through the unbiased, impartial and objective information it provides.

Broadcast Laws

Enact broadcasting laws. The laws include specific legislation for PSB. Without broadcast laws and specific legal underpinning for PSB, it cannot become a reality. Many policymakers in Cambodia still think the existing Press Law, which was designed specifically for print media, can be applied to all forms of media.

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Tax

A percentage of the tax on a particular product could be a sustainable source of PSB funding, and following the Thai example, these funds could go to a PSB account directly without passing through the normal budgetary process in order to avoid political influence.

Other Sources of Funding

Sponsors and/or any sources of funding should be accepted, but should not be allowed to sponsor specific programs. However, they may sponsor programs related to their objectives. For instance, UNESCO could fund education, culture, or science programs, which are related to the main objectives of UNESCO. Random selection of the programs on a monthly or quarterly basis for sponsors might be a good strategy as well. By doing this, PSB content would not be influenced by sponsors.

Sub-Headquarters

If PSB is created, it shall have sub-headquarters throughout the country. Each sub-headquarters would represent a specific region. Dividing the country into regions would make it easier to manage PSB through the concept of decentralization and localization in terms of funding and programming. Each region has its own specific characteristics, and it is crucial that PSB cover the issues that serve best the needs and interests of the people in that region.

Immediate Results of the Forum

The concept and initiative for the establishment of the PSB in Cambodia was widely supported.

H.E. Dr. Cheam Yeap, lawmaker from ruling party CPP and chairman of the National Assembly's Commission of Economy and Finance, said he supported the initiative and acknowledged that Cambodia needs broadcast laws, which he called "cyber law," that include regulations for the internet as well. He ensured that he would report the essence of the forum to the Prime Minister for consideration.

H.E. Him Suong, Under Secretary of State of Information, said at the conclusion of the forum that PSB is important and he acknowledged that having PSB would help not only the government and policymakers, but also the public to actively participate in political debate and share their voices and concerns. He said it was worth working on the establishment of PSB.

Further Action

The forum was a significant starting point of the PSB establishment project. Based on the results of the forum, the following next steps should be envisaged:

An expert working group for discussing a roadmap for the formulation of broadcast laws should be set up and the role/objective of the working group (WG) should be defined. Further activities would be the dissemination of knowledge about the benefits and the added value of a PBS in Cambodia.

The working group's terms of reference need to be developed and distributed for proposed members to review and endorse.