

The Dangers of Activism in Cambodia

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Tep Vanny has spent two years behind bars, away from her family and community. The challenges that she faces highlight how difficult it is to fight for one's rights in Cambodia.

On an overcast afternoon two years ago, Tep Vanny was doing what she knows best. The land rights activist was protesting in her neighbourhood, alongside a couple dozen others, against what she perceived as grave injustices committed by the Cambodian government. The 38-year-old was bundled into an unmarked police car and driven away.

The peaceful vigil, which included candles and effigies of court officials, was in Vanny's eviction-hit Boeung Kak neighbourhood and formed part of the "Black Monday" campaign calling for the release of jailed rights officials. Campaigners were also pushing for a full investigation into the murder of Kem Ley, a political commentator and government critic who had been gunned down a month before in what was widely thought to have been a politically motivated assassination.

After Vanny was taken away, many people assumed that the country's most recognised activist would be given a ticking off before being released. But 730 days later, she remains in a cell with around 70 other women in Phnom Penh's notorious Prey Sar prison.

"She often catches flu, fever, diarrhea. She's always sick," says her 69-year-old mother, Sy Heap.

Vanny's moods swing up and down. While she sometimes can be upbeat, Heap says, there are times she worries about her daughter's state of mind.

"I'm afraid that sometimes she seems hopeless and sometimes I'm worried she might harm herself. I'm afraid she loses hope when she isn't released," Heap says as she stands beneath photos of her daughter at protests, on family trips and posing alongside former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

"When I go to see her I have to encourage her. I don't dare to speak a lot though because people are listening. We cannot talk about politics in the prison."

Deterring others

Despite initially being handed a six-day sentence for "insulting public officials" with fellow activist Bov Sophea over the innocuous "Black Monday" protest, Vanny was kept behind bars as authorities started pulling long-dormant cases out of the woodwork.

One six-month sentence was handed down over a scuffle that broke out with security forces in 2011, while another 30 months were added for allegedly inciting violence at a protest outside Prime Minister Hun Sen's residence in 2013.

The charges have been slammed by rights groups as a cynical political move by the Cambodian government to silence one of their loudest critics, while sending out a warning to others.

Human rights defenders, political commentators and the independent press have come under pressure in the country as Prime Minister Hun Sen clamps down on dissent. Two reporters from Radio Free Asia are facing up to 15 years behind bars on espionage charges widely believed to be politically motivated, while James Ricketson, an Australian filmmaker and outspoken critic of Hun Sen, is facing 10 years for similar charges after flying a drone at an opposition rally. Members of the public have been arrested for “crimes” including calling the government “authoritarian” on Facebook and throwing a sandal at a ruling party billboard. Other critics, including election monitor Koul Panha, are currently living in exile due to fears of arrest after being accused of serving foreign powers, and press freedom has [taken a nosedive](#) in the run-up to the election.

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Activists, journalists and analysts are now thinking twice before speaking out. “I really want to go out and protest but we can’t do it. I’m scared they’ll beat me if I go out. We talked about it together and we are all scared of arrest,” says Nget Khun, a 79-year-old activist from Boeung Kak better known as “Mummy”.

“If the authorities arrest us, who’s going to look after our children?”

The Boeung Kak struggle

Despite receiving a land title three years ago, Khun says the Boeung Kak activists want to help others who have faced similar evictions as her community. In 2007, thousands were forced off their land after Boeung Kak lake was leased to a private developer with close ties to the government. The Boeung Kak activists grew out of this struggle.

Peaking around 2011 and 2012, the movement turned into a real force to be reckoned with. Mostly driven by women, dozens from the community came out in force to protest the seizing of their land, often facing the wrath of armed security forces.

However, the community began to splinter shortly after as factions were accused of being bought off by the government. One member of the community, who requested anonymity for fear of retribution, tells *New Naratif* that local authorities prevented her from continuing construction on a new home until she agreed to join the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP). Despite agreeing, she stayed away from the polling booth in last month’s widely discredited general election.

Khun draws out a poster of one of those alleged “defectors”, Toul Srey Pov, from inside the taupaulin room she’s currently living in. Under a photo of a stern looking Srey Pov text reads: “The side that separated from the community use violence while authorities stand and watch” in Khmer. Khun accuses Srey Pov of pelting her with rocks during one altercation, one of which split her forehead open.

Sitting inside her three-storey home a few hundred yards from Khun’s makeshift home, 41-year-old Srey Pov denies she was ever co-opted by the government. She claims she decided to step away from protesting after getting locked up with Vanny in 2012.

“Upon leaving prison, it was clear we had different visions. I don’t want to be involved in politics and the opposition kept getting involved,” Srey Pov says. “I’m just a normal housewife, not a politician. You must have a high education to be involved in politics.”

Srey Pov calls Vanny “arrogant” and claims she was seeking fame. Now working as an estate agent, she accuses Vanny’s clique of spreading rumours that she was a spy. She also claims she only threw

rocks at the elderly activist in self-defence.

"After I heard that word was going around I was a spy I lost all my strength. These words made me not sleep for one year. I had to take anti-anxiety pills," Srey Pov claims.

"If I knew this before I would have let the company pump sand to flood all the villages and everyone would have suffered."

Despite her relationship with Vanny turning sour, she calls the detention of her former friend "unjust." Her tone switches between bitterness and fond nostalgia when flicking through an old photo album of them on holiday together.

"I miss then, I miss the old memories that we have in the past. We shouldn't have become enemies," she says.

"Bogus" charges

Vanny's lengthy imprisonment is a clear message to any budding activists thinking of standing up to Hun Sen's increasingly authoritarian regime, says Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Asia division.

Since Vanny's imprisonment, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, the only electoral threat to Hun Sen, was dissolved and its leader, Kem Sokha, thrown in jail on charges that many believe to be politically motivated. There was also a widespread crackdown on independent media and civil society ahead of the sham July 29 election, which saw the CPP take all 125 seats in the National Assembly.

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"At the most basic level, the Cambodia government is following the brutal adage of 'killing the chicken to show it to the monkeys', meaning to make an example of one activist to cause fear so others will not dare say anything," Robertson says.

"Seizure of land by government and security officials, their crony business friends, and foreign investment partners is an important path to wealth in Cambodia, and Tep Vanny stands in the way of that—so it's no surprise that she is languishing in prison on bogus charges."

It's now vital that the US and EU governments make Vanny's release a "top priority," Robertson adds.

Future anxieties

Back in Boeung Kak, Vanny's mother Heap says that her daughter isn't hoping for a pardon. In fact, her sentence could be further extended if the courts drag up another case against her.

The situation is having an increasingly negative effect on Vanny's two children, ages 13 and 12, who regularly skip school. "It's impacting on the children's education because they miss their mother. The children are not themselves, it's like they are somewhere else," Heap says.

"She's very strong, she can't betray the people and sell her conscience. She's also stubborn and this makes me concerned"

But although she's languishing in a cramped cell away from her children and community, Heap is certain that her daughter will never cave in to the ruling party, and is likely to continue her activism upon release.

"I don't think she'll stop... people have tried to get her to join the CPP in jail," Heap says. "If she followed and obeyed [the ruling party], she would not be in jail. She's very strong, she can't betray the people and sell her conscience. She's also stubborn and this makes me concerned."

"Vanny knows the difference between right and wrong. It's impossible to buy her."

Mech Dara is a Cambodian freelance reporter covering predominantly politics and human rights issues. He is a former reporter for The Cambodia Daily and The Phnom Penh Post, and now a contributing reporter for VOD in Phnom Penh.

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