

Fact Sheet: Case Study Series: Activism in Cambodia, 2011



Timeline: 2011

Snapshot: The fact sheet examines activism undertaken by ordinary Cambodians in 2011, with a specific focus on three cases - Prey Lang forest, the Angkor beer promoter strike, and Boeung Kak lake land evictions.

Introduction

2011 was marked by courageous acts by ordinary Cambodians to protect their land, their homes, their livelihoods, their traditions, their dignity and their rights more generally. This fact sheet gives an overview of activism in Cambodia in 2011 focusing on three particular cases: Prey Lang forest; the Angkor Beer Promoters; and Boeung Kak lake. This fact sheet is written by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (“CCHR”), a non-aligned, independent, non-governmental organization (“NGO”) that works to promote and protect democracy and respect for human rights – primarily civil and political rights – throughout the Kingdom of Cambodia (“Cambodia”).

Activism in Cambodia

The right to freedom of expression and assembly are protected and promoted by the Constitution of Cambodia (the “Constitution”) and through international human rights instruments incorporated into Cambodian law. Article 35 of the Constitution provides that all Khmer citizens shall have the right to participate actively in the political, economic and social life of the nation. Article 37 guarantees the right to strike and to non-violent demonstration. Additionally, Article 41 asserts that all citizens enjoy the right to freedom of expression and assembly. Over the course of 2011, ordinary Cambodians have exercised these rights in order to speak out on issues that affect them; becoming engaged in peaceful protests, demonstrations, road blocks, strikes and boycotts on issues ranging from land eviction, equitable development and environmental concerns, to labor disputes, and draconian law that will deprive them of their rights. The three headline cases below epitomize activism in action:

- **Prey Lang:** Prey Lang forest - the largest remaining primary forest on the Indochinese peninsula and source of livelihood for over 200,000 people, including a large proportion of the indigenous population known as the Kuy – has over the years become increasingly under threat from private companies who have been granted economic land concessions to log and clear swathes of land for agro-industrial plantations and mining. Throughout 2011, community members from across the Prey Lang area have engaged in activities to bring to light the devastating consequences of economic land concessions on their lives. On 25 May 2011, approximately 200 community members gathered at Freedom Park in Phnom Penh dressed as Avatars demanding an end to all concessions. On 18 August 2011, at 146 sites around the country, Cambodian communities gathered to pray for Prey Lang. In November 2011, hundreds of affected community members spent a week jointly patrolling the forest for illegal loggers. On 14 December 2011, more than 100 villagers defied police attempts to break up a praying ceremony held at Angkor Wat seeking divine help in stopping the destruction of the forest.
- **Angkor Beer Girls Strike:** On 25 July 2011, 60 Angkor beer promoters organized a strike outside the head office of Cambrew, the company that manufactures Angkor beer, to draw attention to violations of the labor law and to discrimination in the workplace. The decision to strike was made after the company refused to comply with the decision of the Arbitration Council that ruled that the company owed the women three years of overtime for working on Sundays. The strike drew support from Cambodian unions who threatened to boycott Angkor

beer and who were able to mobilize international pressure on Carlsberg, which owns half of Cambrew. Through the power of traditional and new media, people across Cambodia, and the world, became aware of the struggle of the Angkor beer promoters, with some bars in Cambodia even refusing to serve Cambrew or Carlsberg products. The strike ended when the company finally capitulated and agreed to pay the women the \$2 overtime owed to them for every Sunday worked since November 2007. Emphasizing the underlying importance of the strike, beer promoter Oum Thavy stated, “[t]he money is not important for the company and it is not important to me. I want the company to respect the law and the women who promote its brands. Even though we work for a company we have rights.”

- **Boeung Kak lake:** Since 2007, Boeung Kak lake, once Phnom Penh’s largest lake, and home to over 4,000 families, has been the subject of an ongoing land dispute after the Municipality of Phnom Penh signed a 99-year lease for 133 hectares of the land with a company called Shukaku Inc., who made plans to fill the lake with sand and develop the area into a city-scape of high-end residential and commercial buildings. With many families evicted, those who have stayed have in the face of a systematic campaign of intimidation mobilized to raise awareness of their cause. Over the course of 2011, residents have actively protested and campaigned outside the Phnom Penh Municipal hall to try and stop the demolition of houses and to be allotted land in the area. On 28 November 2011, women residents of Boeung Kak strode across Monivong Boulevard, one of Phnom Penh’s busiest streets, in an attempt to block traffic as part of a protest against the failure of authorities to begin demarcating the boundary of the 12.44 hectares of land granted to residents by Prime Minister Hun Sen in August 2011, and for the inclusion of the almost 10% of families who seem to have been arbitrarily excluded from the right to receive title to their plots. Following the incident, four female activists appeared before the Phnom Penh Municipal Court and were charged with insult and obstruction of public officials.

Conclusion

Ordinary Cambodians have shown over the course of 2011 a resilience and determination to stand up and protect their homes, their land, their livelihoods, and their lives. They have developed innovative ways of bringing to light their struggles and through the use of traditional and new media have communicated and brought their cause to people’s attention, both within Cambodia and across the world. These ordinary Cambodians have done so in spite of being faced with frequent acts of intimidation, harassment and violence, and having criminal sanctions brought against them for simply exercising their right to defend their rights. The Royal Government of Cambodia (the “RGC”) must ensure that their fundamental rights of freedom of expression and assembly, and their right to participate in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the nation are respected. These are the very people whom the RGC is representing, and it is paramount that their voices are heard so that Cambodia can develop towards an inclusive democracy where all Cambodians reap the benefit of development and progress.

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