Cambodia’s Democratic Warrior

Why politician Mu Sochua is the country’s best hope for political reform.
Dustin Roasa  December 2, 2010 | 12:00 am

On a Saturday morning in July, Cambodian opposition politician Mu Sochua traveled to the dusty, sun-baked suburbs of Phnom Penh for a rally. Close to 100 Cambodians—most of them poor women sitting on plastic chairs squeezed into the ground-floor room of a supporter’s house—stood and applauded when she arrived. Wearing a traditional sarong, with her silver-streaked brown hair tied back, the American-educated parliamentarian took a microphone and began to speak. “People are in the mood for change. The government is afraid of the power of the opposition,” she said, her rising voice punctuated by the chants of Buddhist monks wafting in from a nearby temple. A supporter dimmed the lights, and Mu Sochua, who represents the southern Kampot Province, lit a slender white candle, the symbol of her political party. She then led the room in a stirring rendition of the patriotic song “We Are Khmer.”

The next general election in Cambodia is not until 2013, so Mu Sochua wasn’t trying to convince people to go to the polls. But there was still pressing political business to attend to: She had recently been the target of a defamation lawsuit, surreal even by Cambodia’s authoritarian standards. In April 2009, Prime Minister Hun Sen used the epithet “strong legs,” a colloquialism for a prostitute, to describe Mu Sochua in a speech. She sued him for defamation, and Hun Sen countersued—the logic being that accusing the prime minister of defamation is itself an act of defamation. Predictably, the courts, which are stocked with judges loyal to Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), threw out the case against the prime minister, found Mu Sochua guilty, and fined her. She refused to pay the fine, even when the courts threatened to throw her in jail.

Taking advantage of a seemingly bad situation, Mu Sochua used rallies, like the one I attended, to draw support for both her legal dilemma and her broader goal of democratic reform. And, in late July, as criticism from human rights groups in Cambodia and abroad mounted, the government backed down and ordered her fine deducted from Mu Sochua’s parliamentary wages. She was spared from prison—but the damage, at least to the government, had already been done.

Using the defamation suit as a springboard, Mu Sochua had positioned herself almost overnight as the leading opposition figure in Cambodia. Her story garnered significant attention from both the local and international press, the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament have highlighted her case, and many Cambodians now see her as the natural successor to Sam Rainsy, the longtime opposition leader who was forced into exile following
his own court convictions for criticizing the government. “Before the defamation case, she was not very well-known by the Cambodian public, but this case has raised her profile significantly,” says human rights activist Ou Virak. “She’s the only woman who’s willing to stand up to Hun Sen.”

**Although Cambodia is** ostensibly democratic—national elections are held every five years—Hun Sen dominates the country with an efficient, omnipresent patronage network that rewards loyalty and punishes dissent. Corruption is endemic, the country’s health and education systems are among the weakest in Asia, and, while the per capita income has doubled over the last decade from a starting point of nearly zero, the fruits of that growth are hoarded by a political and military elite.

It was not supposed to be this way. In 1992, after years of Khmer Rouge rule and Vietnamese occupation, the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) arrived in Phnom Penh to administer elections and bring an end to decades of armed conflict. Driven by guilt from complicity in Cambodia’s misery, donor countries like the United States and France made UNTAC the largest and most expensive nation-building exercise of its time, and hopes were high that it would establish a multiparty democracy that would protect human rights.

In 1993, 90 percent of Cambodians ignored threats of violence from remnants of the Khmer Rouge, who were fighting an insurgency against the government from bases on the border with Thailand, and voted in the UNTAC-administered national election. By 1997, however, the royalist party that won that election was forced out by Hun Sen, himself a former mid-level Khmer Rouge commander, in a bloody coup. That same year, Sam Rainsy nearly died in a grenade attack widely thought to be orchestrated by troops loyal to Hun Sen.

Today, nearly 20 years after the arrival of UNTAC, diplomats and aid workers rarely use the lofty rhetoric of democracy. Rather, there is tacit acceptance that Cambodia has settled into a “one-party plus” existence, as a recent U.S. government-sponsored assessment put it, with the opposition providing the patina of pluralism. “Democratic space is shrinking, and dissenting views are being stifled,” said Yeng Virak, head of a Cambodian legal-aid organization. “Cambodia is going back to square one.”

Mu Sochua has witnessed much of this tumult firsthand. As a young girl growing up in a merchant family in Phnom Penh in the 1950s and ‘60s, Mu Sochua’s father warned her never to go into politics. “He had many friends in government, and he knew about corruption,” she told me. She intended to take his advice, but the war in Vietnam intervened and sent her on the long path to becoming a politician. With Phnom Penh under rocket attacks from a growing Khmer Rouge insurgency, she left for Paris in 1972 and ended up in San Francisco a year later. In 1975, news stopped arriving from Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge had taken Phnom Penh, and she later learned that her parents had died.

After helping resettle Cambodian immigrants in the United States and earning a master’s degree in social work from the University of California at Berkeley, Mu Sochua returned to Southeast Asia in 1981 to work with the 300,000 Cambodian refugees living in camps along the Thai border. Determined to help rebuild her country, she moved back to Phnom Penh in 1989, worked with UNTAC, and, in 1998, successfully ran for parliament as a member of the royalist FUNCINPEC Party, which was then part of the ruling coalition. She was appointed Minister of Women’s Affairs that same year, and she authored Cambodia’s first domestic violence law.

The defining moment of her political career, as she describes it, came in 2004. Chea Vichea, a labor leader and government critic, was shot dead in the middle of the day while reading a newspaper on the street. “I saw his body covered with blood, and heard his daughter saying to her daddy, ‘Wake up, wake up,’” she recounts. Unable to work any longer in Hun Sen’s regime, Mu Sochua left the government to join the opposition Sam Rainsy Party. She vowed to promote policies that protected democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.
But it’s been difficult to make a dent in her country’s political and policy landscapes: Mu Sochua made her move out of the ruling coalition at a time when Hun Sen’s CPP was ascending, and, since then, successive national elections have only seen it consolidate its hold on parliament. Opposition politicians accuse the government of electoral cheating, and, undoubtedly, some vote-buying and intimidation occur. But, in reality, the CPP has evolved into a sophisticated political machine that no longer needs to cheat on a large scale to win. (That’s why international observers agreed the 2008 election Cambodia’s freest and fairest yet.) With its vast financial resources, far-reaching party apparatus, and control of the country’s broadcast media, the CPP has managed to use carefully crafted propaganda to keep many Cambodians, particularly rural ones, on their side.

Where does this leave the opposition? With no real legislative power, it is reduced to publicly antagonizing the government, a tactic polling has shown Cambodians don’t respond to. “It’s a chicken and egg issue. Because of the opposition’s antagonistic approach, there are lawsuits against them, which feeds their antagonism,” Ou Virak said. Lacking the resources necessary to spread its message and win more votes without this aggressive edge, the opposition has turned to stoking moral indignation about Cambodia’s situation abroad, operating more like a dissident movement in an authoritarian country than a political party trying to build a constituency.

But the international community, including the United States, remains an unreliable partner, according to activists in Cambodia. Donor countries can take credit for some achievements—for instance, the revitalization of Cambodian civil society after it was decimated by the Khmer Rouge. But embassies and the U.N. today are hesitant to publicly criticize the government on its human rights record, allowing their abuses to go on largely unchecked. “What the international community is failing to do is fulfill their role of promoting democracy. The donors announced $1.2 billion in aid the same day the court upheld my defamation conviction. What’s the message?” Mu Sochua said.

It’s between a weak opposition and unreliable international support where Mu Sochua might be able to step in and change things. Although she speaks of feeling a kinship with Barack Obama and the U.S. Democratic Party, it’s her emphasis on issues particular to Cambodia, such as land rights for the thousands of poor farmers and government corruption, that has attracted a strong following. By holding rallies and meeting face-to-face with voters—a style of retail politics not typical in this country, where many people do not know who represents them in parliament—Mu Sochua is building a grassroots movement that many Cambodians see as the best chance to revive the opposition and hold Hun Sen’s government accountable for its actions (and inactions).

Though it is virtually impossible to quantify her support, political observers in Cambodia say Mu Sochua’s star is rising—particularly after she used her increased visibility in the wake of the defamation case to promote her agenda. “She is a role model for many Cambodian men and women,” Yeng Virak said. At the rally I attended, Mu Sochua invited a woman to the front of the room and handed her the microphone. Dressed in worn pajamas, with her eyes cast downward, the woman tearfully described the daily police harassment that makes it impossible for her to make a living as a vegetable seller in the local market. Mu Sochua put her arm around the woman and said, “The problem is no justice. We must find justice for her.”

While it is unlikely she could find this justice by single-handedly unseating the ruling CPP (the next elections are years away, and the CPP’s apparatus is still mighty), Mu Sochua could shine a spotlight on human rights, judicial, and other abuses better than any Cambodian political force in recent memory. Granted, this sort of opposition has always been a difficult to build. While Sam Rainsy was exiled, lesser critics, including the head of a cultural foundation who dared to ask whether a lighting system being drilled into Angkor Wat might harm the ancient temples, have faced prison sentences and either fled the country or publicly apologized. And the government has Mu Sochua in its sights: When the rally I attended was over, she wanted to tour the local market and talk to poor voters, but her security detail advised against it due to the many plainclothes police lurking. “Things are just too tense right now,” she said.

But there are glimmers of hope that things might be different for Mu Sochua. Back in the car, she discussed the defamation case and the government’s decision to spare her from jail. “Hun Sen miscalculated,” she said. “For
fifteen months now, I’ve been dragging this thing out, and I got free publicity.” But, while she may have avoided punishment and been able to augment the reach and media presence of her democratic crusade, Mu Sochua doesn’t think she’s won—not yet. “If the prime minister were to admit that he was wrong in the past, and he called everyone together for reform, that would be a victory for me,” she said.

Dustin Roasa is a journalist living in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

For more TNR, become a fan on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

Source URL: http://www.tnr.com/article/world/79558/cambodias-democratic-warrior-mu-sochua-political-reform