

Haunted by Past Horrors, Cambodians Speak Out

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PHNOM PENH, [Cambodia](#) — Leaving their crops and animals behind, 800 of Cambodia's poorest people gathered the other day in the shade of a blue tarpaulin in a village south of the capital and poured out a torrent of complaints and demands.

The price of fuel, the poor education system, problems with health care, bribery at every turn — these grievances have found a new outlet in a series of independent forums that are challenging the control of information by an increasingly repressive government. But the subject that dominated all others in this meeting in the commune of Rokar Khnong was a passionate demand for free speech and democratic rights.

One man wept as he stood at the microphone. One shouted. One raised a cheer for democracy. An elderly woman with cropped white hair recited a poem in which she promised to die so that her country could live.

"I love democracy," declared a farmer, who spoke boldly, but like the other participants did not give his name for fear of being arrested. "I stopped work on my harvest so I could come here and speak at a democratic forum. We want to exercise our right to free speech."

Even the organizers said they were taken aback by the turnout and assertiveness of the villagers. The government has been cracking down on free speech and in recent months has arrested several human rights advocates.

Among those arrested was Kem Sokha, who founded these independent forums three years ago. Since then, they have taken place more than 100 times, in every district of the country. And their impact has grown through taped broadcasts — some lasting four hours or more — on independent radio stations, which have also become targets of the crackdown.

Earlier this month, under international pressure, Prime Minister [Hun Sen](#) released Mr. Kem Sokha and three other activists on bail and now says he will drop defamation charges against them. But other activists and political figures remain in jail, and the threat of arrest still hangs over those who speak out.

The outrage in Rokar Khnong suggests that the government will not have it easy if it tries to crush the democratic ideas that were introduced by the United Nations in the early 1990's as it sought to end decades of bloodshed. The concepts of human rights and free

expression appear to have taken root, and if Mr. Kem Sokha's forums are an indicator, the fields and villages of Cambodia are restless with discontent.

"I have a question for the government," said an old woman wearing a checkered head cloth. "You talk about democracy, but how much right do the people of Cambodia have to speak out? If we speak out, will we be arrested like Kem Sokha?"

Another woman seized the microphone. "I have lived through many wars, and I only have two relatives left alive," she said. "I am old now, and I want to see democracy before I die."

Another followed: "I don't know how to speak," she said, "but I just want to send a message to Hun Sen. Stop sending people to jail for small crimes. You are abusing your power."

Furthermore, she said, nobody can believe anything the government says. Referring to the government's official spokesman, she used a local expression: "You ask him cow, and he answers buffalo."

Several speakers were angry enough to refer to the torments of the Khmer Rouge years, from 1975 to 1979, when 1.7 million people were executed or died of starvation, disease or overwork.

"In the Khmer Rouge time, my father was served soup and they asked him if it tasted good," one man said. "'Tell the truth,' they said. And so he said it did not taste good, and they killed him. Now when we speak the truth, are we going to be jailed? Is Cambodia going back to the Communists again?"

Another man, a former schoolteacher, noted that Mr. Kem Sokha had been arrested simply for having political slogans painted on a banner. "What about the Khmer Rouge, who killed millions of Cambodians 27 years ago?" he said. "Why haven't they been put on trial?"

After years of delay, preparations for a trial have finally begun, though any proceedings are still many months away. Human rights advocates say the enduring impunity of the Khmer Rouge has contributed to a sense of injustice in Cambodia.

As with other forums, local leaders were invited to join a panel in front of the speakers. At Rokar Khnong, a deputy village chief and deputy district police chief were present. Ou Virak, a member of Mr. Kem Sokha's organization, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, was moderating in his absence and invited them to speak.

"In a democratic forum, we want to hear opposing ideas, not just the people who support the forum," he said.

Seng Toich, the police officer, stood up.

"Some people focus all the time on individual rights and think that means we can do anything we want," he said. "But our rights have limitations. They cannot be used to harm others."

Temples must limit the use of loudspeakers in order not to disturb the peace, he said. A motorcycle rider must obey traffic rules. A farmer cannot graze his animals in a public park. Speech that is too free can harm the reputations of others.

A student rose to rebut him. "That is not what we are asking for, to break traffic rules or disturb the peace, but to exercise our democratic rights," he said.

The meeting ended with a reading of the section of the Cambodian Constitution guaranteeing the rights of free speech and free assembly.

Mr. Ou Virak, the moderator, said it was beginning to be more difficult to organize the forums because of new fears of retribution in the villages. As the day's meeting dispersed, he thanked the local officials for allowing it to be held.