

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

Preserving KR History: An Integral Part in Upholding Democracy in Cambodia

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Introduction

Inside a public park in Prey Veng provincial town, thousands of youths participated in a two-day Youth Festival, organized for the sixth time by the International Republic Institute (IRI) and the Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC). The August 16-17 festival was composed of exhibits, seminars and interactive programs on topics such as upholding democracy, setting up political party programs, researching public opinion, developing leadership, fundraising, debating, raising HIV/AIDS awareness, and creating space for an independent media. In an attempt to “offer youths to learn about political and civic educational activities,”¹ non-governmental organizations, the business sector and government officials each provided their perspectives on these topics. Youths were expected to develop, consolidate, and broaden their “insight and ideas in democracy, human rights and information technology....”²



Youths meet ahead of the festival.

The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), a not-for-profit and apolitical organization working to document Khmer Rouge history, sent three staff members led by Ms. Sayana Ser, holder of a masters degree from the Netherlands, to take part in the festival and to display DC-Cam’s “*Searching for the Truth*” magazine and research publications. Inside the DC-Cam booth, while some youths stood and skimmed

through photographs, others sat down, absorbed in books and magazines. After touring of each of the festivals' 35 booths, many youths were pleased to give us short interviews on topics ranging from the quality of our publications to their historical, political, educational and legal understanding of these materials.

Youths' Understanding and Perception of KR History

Decorated with red, yellow, dark and light green cloth and Khmer lettering spelling “Memory and Justice,” DC-Cam’s booth attracted school children, teachers and the general public, who didn’t want to miss the opportunity to learn about its display. After scanning through the magazines

¹ <http://www.iri.org/>

² <http://www.iri.org/>

and the Khmer Rouge history book displayed on a round table with red carpet, some youths became excited to tell us what they had heard about the Pol Pot regime from their parents. Others asked us for a brief explanation of what happened during those years.

Chhit Srey Mom, 29 years old and a teacher of 9th grade at Prey Veng secondary school, emphasized how invaluable it is for youth to learn from the events of this era. For example, school children can hold discussions about the atrocities and in so doing exercise their freedom of expression. On the other hand, Ek Song Chhay, 22, from Hun Sen Kampong Leav High School, complained that he had previously had very little knowledge about the Khmer Rouge regime.

53-year-old Sam Sophal, teacher of Prek Anteh primary school, came to our booth with a strong desire to get ahold of some of our materials for his students. Asked whether he has told his school children about Pol Pot regime, he said that his students had learned a lot about it from his lectures. He said that his students believe him because they had already heard stories about that time from their parents. Nevertheless, their faces become grim when they hear about the gravity of the mass killings committed by Pol Pot regime during 1975-79. Some of them find it hard to believe that the regime brought such horrendous killing on the Cambodian people. For this reason, he advocated the formal inclusion of a history of Khmer Rouge regime in the school curriculum. A teacher since 1979, he noted that although at one time the curriculum had included the crimes of the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique, this material was later dropped for some reason.



Inside DC-Cam booth

Four out of seven people who commented on our booth wrote in appreciation of DC-Cam's history book and encouraged others to read it to know the bitter history of the Khmer Rouge years. Yem Nat, 40, eager to know what happened to his lost relatives also suggested that "a list of names of those who died and disappeared during the KR regime should be published in magazines or books and broadcasted on radio or television."

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Youth's Understanding of Democracy

Democracy is a relatively new concept for most Cambodian people. There is no doubt that different people define this term in different ways. The IRI and YCC organize many political and educational events on this concept in order to engrain it into people from all walks of life, especially youths.

During scores of interviews, many youths attending the festival expressed their views on democracy and the potential roles it can play in society. Mao Puthearoth, 25, coordinator of YCC, said that two types of democracy can impact youths' lives. First, is living democracy, which is related to daily practice that can prompt young people to make considered

decisions about work and family life. Second is advanced democracy, of which many youths have little knowledge. For that reason the YCC has set up a training program to help them understand. As part of this program, the YCC organizes an actual commune council meeting with the presence of three commune officials. Youths are given the opportunity to raise their concerns through collective petitions that ask their communes to resolve these problems on behalf of the people. At these meetings, a mock vote is held so that youths can learn and practice voting processes.

22-year-old Thuok Thida, a Prey Veng youth representative and YCC staff member, noted, “When we just talk about democracy, we tend to think it is all about politics. In fact, democracy is related to youths’ participation in their community and their right self-determination. It encourages them to respect each other, take responsibility for themselves, and strictly abide by the law.” Thida recollected that at first her parents didn’t want her involved in this work. They thought that democracy is closely related to politics that her work may put her personal safety in danger. Thida stressed that her parents had changed their stance after she proves that she has helped the youths in Cambodia.



Youths are debating

Referring to the national election, Sophal stressed that democracy requires people to have basic knowledge and balanced information to enable them make an informed decision in choosing their country’s leaders. San Chetra, 18, 1st year student at the pedagogical school, defined “democracy” as people being able to exercise their power to vote for the leaders they like. He added that although democracy in Cambodia has made considerable progress, youths require additional training on democracy and human rights.

According to our observations, the public, youth, and those below 18 years old all actively participated in the festival. For example, a youth election campaign group passing by our booth worked hard to convince the people they met to support their “Chaktomuk” political party. In a mock election, Aun Dany, youth representative of Prey Veng province, stood as a Chaktomuk candidate for a parliamentary post. In the party’s campaign materials her group wrote: “Please, vote for Aun Dany. She will protect Prey Veng youths’ benefits.” This example proves how valuable an experience it was for the youths to learn by doing.

Youth's Role in Promoting the Rule of Law

Youths represent the largest proportion of Cambodia's population, accounting for 9.8 million of around 14 million people. In Prey Veng province the population constitutes 8.3 percent, with a literacy rate standing at 64.4 percent.³ For this reason, youths are playing a key role in social, political, educational, legal, cultural and economic sphere. Their proportionately high literacy rate gives them the means to understand current issues and promote social and legal justice for the country. Thus it is notable that when asked about the KR tribunal most of the youths we interviewed agreed that it is important for Cambodia to fight against the culture of impunity so that the rule of law will flourish.

Trial of KR Leaders

Although many youths have studied for years at public schools, they have heard little about the Pol Pot regime except from their parents' oral narratives. Thouk Thida said that her parents often speak about their horrible lives during those 3 years, eight months and 20 days and tell her that the regime considered humans to be animals. Her parents told her that at that time, minor mistakes were condemned by death. As a result, nearly two million people died from malnutrition, disease, exhaustion, and execution between 1975 and 1979.



Youths at a mock election

In reaction to the crimes committed during Pol Pot regime, Thida appreciated the current effort to bring those responsible to justice. Her strong wish is for a quick trial, as both she and the Cambodian people are eager to see its outcome. San Chetra keeps wondering why there is still no actual trial, noting that an avalanche of evidence was left behind after the fall of the Pol Pot regime.

As many teenagers learned at the festival, the Khmer Rouge regime was authoritarian, robbing the people of their fundamental rights and freedoms. They thus were able to understand that concrete legal measures are indispensable if the rule of law is to be strengthened and consolidated. For this reason, the youth attending the festival appealed to the KR tribunal to bring justice to the KR victims through internationally accepted standards of justice. Thida told us that she is confident of youths' role in generating discussion on the trial and these important issues.

Youth's Social Concerns and Recommendations

Although most youths were pleased with the democratic environment in their family, community and country, they still see many social problems. Ek Song Chhay expressed his concern about the vulnerability of youth to

³ http://www.moc.gov.kh/national_data_resource/Provincial%20Resources/Prey%20Veng.

drug use that can damage their health and education. Worse still, they may become involved in gangster activity. Chhay also noted that the high percentage of road accident among youth is a worrying problem. On the other hand, San Chetra expressed concern about the inadequate irrigation in his village. For this reason he viewed Chhay's concerns as a lesser priority, arguing that in rural areas such problems have little impact on the youth welfare.

Nevertheless, Chetra agreed that preventive measures by state law enforcement organs must be taken against the social problem raised by Chhay. Both Chhay and Chetra prioritized the role of education in helping reduce and prevent youth violence and drug use. Chhay concluded, "Knowledge can help them to avoid this bad behavior." Likewise, Thida underscored that "every youth should know that society needs them to be its main pillars. They should have in mind whether their conduct is right or wrong."

After the baccalaureate examination this year, Chhay plans to study rural development so that he can build roads and develop a sufficient irrigation system for farmers. Both Chhay and Chetra called on the government to create more jobs for graduates.

Conclusion

This is the first time that the IRI and YCC have organized a Youth Festival in Prey Veng province. Many youths learned a lot from the event. Expressing their happiness in attending, some suggested that the event be carried out on a yearly basis. They said that it was an important forum for youths to work hard together and to get to know each other. Moreover, they noted that the exhibits and seminars had given them the opportunity to learn about the province's agricultural products as well as political and educational activities.

Each visitor to DC-Cam's booth was able to read our research publications and to receive 200 copies of our monthly Khmer language "*Searching for the Truth*" magazine and 200 copies of the ECCC booklets free-of-charge. Chou Bun Lean, chief of border project management of Cambodian Women for Peace and Development organization, requested that we provide her every issue of the magazine and all our other KR-related documents. The youth in attendance also gave us scores of interviews about Khmer Rouge history and the hybrid tribunal now holding five charged persons — Kaing Guek Iev *alias* Duch, Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith — accused of committing crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Compared with the previous five youth festivals the one in Prey Veng had a smaller number of booths. Nevertheless, it attracted the attendance of a large number of youths. Many youth training programs were created. We would say that Prey Veng's youth were very helpful, brave and smart, particularly during the debate sessions. This equipped them with a good understanding of the Khmer Rouge regime and tribunal. More importantly, it gave them the skills to grasp the connection between this historical subject and current efforts in Cambodia to promote the concepts of democracy and human rights.