

A Man of the Mountains

The first time I met Plang Sin, he was wearing a modern-style short-sleeved shirt with a traditional pattern of the Bunong tribe. A striped, red, black and green shirt was not something I would normally admire, but on Sin, it made me want one too and along with this his wide-sideburns that would have rocked 1950s America. He was not what I expected from the leader of The Cambodian Indigenous People's Democratic Party.

A mutual friend called Midy had agreed to introduce me to Sin so Midy, his eight-year-old son and I sat on his motorbike driving to Bousra, home of Cambodia's mightiest waterfall and Plang Sin. As Midy frantically shifted gears to pull the three of us up rolling hills, I looked around at the luscious green forest. All the flora was green, many different colours of green, but there were no yellows, no reds, and not even very much brown. When viewed from a certain hill, just as the light changes with sunset, this expanse of green appears midnight blue attracting people to gaze upon the 'Sea Forest'.

Approaching Bousra, the forest gave way to gigantic pepper plantations, one Cambodian owned and the other South Korean. The wooden houses were often on stilts with little stalls at the front selling fruit, vegetables or packets of food. The house opposite Sin's had a pig, with rolls of fat and a belly resting on the ground, muzzling the grass without ever looking up.

Sitting outside the front of Sin's house in the shade of a giant, weeping tree, with one of his dogs lying on my foot, I said that I was surprised not to see any posters for his party, given the 2018 national

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election was only weeks away. Midy thought that it may have been because Sin feared reprisals from the local authorities but no, Sin sheepishly replied that he felt funny about promoting himself.¹

Sin was originally a FUNCINPEC member and was still one when he voted for the CNRP at the 2013 election. He had grown disillusioned with FUNCINPEC’s self-serving leaders and switched to the CNRP, not because he thought they greatly supported indigenous people, but because “they were better than no hope.”² What little hope there was turned to disappointment in September 2014 when 300 families, mainly ethnic Cham, arrived from a different province, took over 2000 hectares and began felling trees. The Government had designated the area as a Social Land Concession, something intended for landless poor to generate subsistence farming, and given it to Cham people.

Bunong people were enraged as Cham began clearing forest that Bunong used for rotation farming and churning up Spirit Lands where ancestors were buried. The Government had not erected posts to demarcate the land meaning Cham families went beyond the intended boundaries. Plang Sin knew not to expect any help from the local authorities but was disappointed when Rainsy did not call for the land to be given back, only appealing for Bunong and Cham people to stop fighting as they were all one Khmer. Demoralised, Sin and many others left the CNRP.³

When the Cham people had arrived, the Bunong people of Bousra had already lost land to a Luxembourg company called Socfin and a

¹ Plang Sin, Author’s interview No. 116

² Plang Sin, Author’s interview No. 116

³ References for this section are Plang Sin, Author’s interview No. 116 and Seiff, A. & Chhorn, C. (2014, September 4). Cambodia’s Muslims and minorities in land grants battle. Union of Catholic Asian News. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucanews.com/>

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Vietnamese company called Dat Lat. Both were granted thousands of hectares to create rubber plantations. Villagers were offered a choice of two deals. Option one allowed the company to clear the land, plant rubber trees and share income from sales with villagers, or villagers could sell the land to the company for \$200 per hectare. There was no option of keeping their land as it was and Dat Lat began digging up the forests before villagers even knew what was happening, losing their farms of bananas, mangoes, avocados and vegetables.

Plang Sin did not talk to many local villagers about his plan to set up a political party, hoping local authorities wouldn't find out, but he did speak to other indigenous leaders who supported his idea. To register a party, you need seven people agreeing to be officials and 4000 thumbprints from people declaring their support. Having just bumped along a road for nearly two hours to reach Bousra from Mondolkiri's main town, the enormity of trying to get 4000 thumbprints in sparsely populated rural Cambodia left me flabbergasted.

Sin could not hold big forums in case they drew the attention of Government officials and police so organised meetings of small groups. For one whole year, Sin rode his motorbike thousands of miles around Cambodia's most remote provinces, spending many days at a time away from home.⁴ He called upon friends and contacts he had made over the years being a campaigner hoping to gather people together. He was never threatened, although village chiefs often tried to dissuade him from holding meetings. More commonly, village chiefs or police would go to the homes of people who attended meetings and intimidate them by saying that only the CPP was legal, and other parties were supported by foreigners. The village chief or police would tell people they were

⁴ Plang Sin, Author's interview No. 153

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breaking the law if they supported this new party and wrote down the names of everybody who attended meetings. Once the police and military surrounded and then physically broke up a meeting.⁵

I was still trying to work out how Sin managed to keep all those thumb-printed pieces of paper dry while driving around in the wet season when he began to tell me of the fear he felt at first, especially when going to the Ministry of Interior. The image of an ageing Bunong man from rural Mondolkiri walking into the Ministry building in Phnom Penh to tell them he was going to start a political party left me pleasantly dumbstruck.

Sin’s admission of fear brought his wife into the conversation, who joked that she did not worry about him because his party was too small to fight with the CPP. She may not have believed her husband’s party had much chance, but it was her and their adult children who made it possible for Sin to spend days away from the farm.

“It was difficult for my family but the whole family supports me”, Sin explained. “They are all interested in politics. They helped on the farm so I could go and get thumbprints. They know the livelihood of our people is critical. The forest is being destroyed so they were willing.”

Midy, a good friend of Sin, asked him what he thought of the CNRP calling for a boycott and criticizing parties that were participating. Sin understood why Rainsy called for a boycott, but had hope with them. “They love democracy but look down on small parties. Sometimes, Sam Rainsy is wrong, conducts himself wrongly. If his party is dissolved by

⁵ Plang Sin, Author’s interview No. 153

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Government, he should encourage people to vote for another party, to challenge CPP. This is real democracy.”⁶

Rainsy had also angered indigenous people after he signed an agreement with a persecuted ethnic group on the Vietnamese side of the border that would give them land to live autonomously in Cambodia.⁷ Midy suggested this may have been a tactic to build an alliance of indigenous groups that would push Vietnamese companies off the land, but Sin felt Rainsy giving their land to indigenous people from Vietnam was just the same as the CPP selling land to Vietnamese companies.⁸

Sin had gathered a few hundred core supporters who planned to hold moto parades in different towns in nearby provinces. He had ordered them t-shirts and their tannoys were ready.⁹ I asked Sin what he hoped to achieve in the upcoming election, but ever modest, he declined to share any expectations. Sitting on a log a few yards away, his wife smiled to herself. She knew his chances, but they were not the measure of the man.

Two days after the election, my friend Midy and I met Plang Sin, the side-burned grandfather leader of the Cambodian Indigenous People’s Democratic Party. He welcome us at his house in the highlands of Mondolkiri, where the last remaining elephants still roam and we sat around a huge wooden table eating steamed corn-on-cob that Sin’s smiling wife had brought for us.

⁶ Plang Sin, Author’s interview No. 153

⁷ Plang Sin, Author’s interview No. 153; Murdoch, L. & Geraghty, K. (2018, June 20). The next Macau? China’s big gamble in Cambodia. Sydney Morning Herald. Retrieved from: <https://www.smh.com.au/9>

⁸ Plang Sin, Author’s interview No. 153

⁹ Plang Sin, Author’s interview No. 153

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It was 9am and the sun had been up for hours but a magnificent red, brown and green cockerel still crowed incessantly, pecking in the grassy dirt around us. A straggly brown dog slumped down in the shade of a giant, drooping tree, wishing the cockerel to be quiet. Sin sat down on the faded red plastic chair to my right, with Midy on my left facing Sin. Sin brought us coffee and placed on the table in front of him his spectacles and a sheet of paper with scribbled letters and numbers on it. It was his tally of votes from the election.

“I saw on TV that you won more than 10,000 votes, are you happy with that? How many did you hope to get?” I asked after Midy and Sin had finished catching up.

“I did not really think about how many votes we wanted. I just wanted to win one seat in the [National] Assembly...We got 1100 votes in Siem Reap. I didn't think that they even knew who we are.”

Sin was obviously proud, but a little perplexed as Siem Reap was on the other side of Cambodia. He put his spectacles on, held up the piece of paper and began to read out how many votes they received in other provinces. “Kampong Cham, 1388. Kratie, 1374. Mondolkiri, 1389...”

“What was it like when you saw the results being announced?” I asked.

“I was excited to see support in provinces where we did not even campaign. Like Siem Reap and Svay Rieng. We only campaigned in four [of 25] provinces. Maybe if we advertised a lot, we could get a seat. We knew it would be hard. I regret that we cannot join the Assembly. We will not have a voice to talk about land and destruction of forest.”

“Have you had many people contact you to congratulate you?”

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“Hmmm, not many yet. The activists in the party are proud though.”

“What about your neighbours? The other people living around here, have they said anything to you?”

“Oh, some said that it is good that a new party started, but they still voted for the [Cambodian] People's Party.”

Sin didn't look at me focussing instead on fiddling with his spectacles or the piece of paper. Respectful of guests, he hadn't touched any of the corn, unlike Midy who was already devouring his second. Despite many indigenous people living in Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri, Plang Sin's party didn't do especially well in these provinces.

“Why do you think so many indigenous people didn't vote for your party? I asked.

“People don't know well about democracy and what it means. They are still poorly educated and appreciate the rich, powerful party. They get gifts.”

Sin paused, looking up and opening his shoulders. He began to speak, chuckling a little.

“CPP is smart. They do things that people can see – like schools and roads. They can point to them, but the problems are hidden. You cannot see them. Things like corruption. And they say they are the ones who saved you from the Khmer Rouge and without them we will go back to war. People are afraid of civil war. Of fighting. But they do not see the fighting every day – the forests, the land.”

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I let Sin’s moment of silence continue, broken only by the self-aggrandising cockerel. I casually reached for a cob of corn, hoping to mask the directness of the question I was about to ask.

“Sin, what do you feel about indigenous people, your neighbours, who for vote for the CPP?”

“I cannot say no to anger. To depression. Hopelessness. Even if I say no, my members, they feel it. We create a party for our people, but they deny us. They are still for CPP. My team are angry, angry because of regret.”

I bit into my cob and looked at Midy as I lifted my head. His eyebrows were raised showing surprise at my temerity and need to ask such an obvious question. His expression often belied a belief that I was an idiot for asking questions that were obvious to every Cambodian.

“You spent over a year driving around Cambodia to get the 4000 thumbprints needed to establish the party. All of that time you spent away from home. Away from your family, and with the army and police trying to stop you. Has it been worth it?”

“Still worth it. This is long term. I haven’t found another way better than this way. I have been to many meetings with charities but the Government doesn’t care. So, we have one choice. Get involved in politics.”

“Will you continue for the commune council elections in 2022 and national elections in 2023?”

“Yes. We will try to promote our party in half the country. Open offices in provinces and collect members. Build principles that can appeal to people.”

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Sin took off his spectacles and put them and the piece of paper down on the table as a conclusion to his first national election.

When I look back at photos of Sin, I am surprised to see how small he is. He is a man that without a trace of bombast appears bigger than he is. He is unlikely to ever win enough votes to gain a seat despite May Titthara’s sympathetic coverage in *The Khmer Times*, but he has undeniable stature.

When I had met him before, I forgot to ask where he had stayed when he was travelling around rural Cambodia collecting thumbprints, so asked one last question.

“I would stay with relatives” and then he paused giving a hint of a smile from the corner of his mouth. “I would say that I was going to Kratie and they would say that they have a cousin or somebody who lives there. So, I would stay with them. I have many relatives now!”

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