We may differ but we see the same need for #change.

This material is distributed by Sochua Mu Leiper on behalf of the Cambodia National Rescue Party. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC
A pair of Cambodian opposition figures take distinct resistance paths; offer differing visions of reform and disruption while sharing a goal to change the Kingdom's political future.

Exiled opposition leader Mu Sochua is steadfast that the spirit of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) is still alive. Even as its former leaders remain scattered around the globe, await trial for trumped-up charges or try to drum up support for new parties with few resources, “it’s very clear – very clear – that the CNRP remains the main opposition,” Sochua said during a recent video call. “We have not disappeared.”

Other activists disagree. Theary Seng, another of the roughly 130 dissidents facing mass trial who has emerged as a cause célèbre in recent months for attending her trial hearings in apsara clothes or shackles, has called for Cambodians to ditch traditional politics.

“Political campaigning in this time period is a dead end,” Seng said. If no leading opposition party could win when it was stronger and operating in a freer environment, “why would it win now?”

The question of what's next for Cambodia’s fractured opposition, along with the value of participation in elections widely panned as illegitimate, has gained fresh urgency as commune elections loom this spring and Prime Minister Hun Sen readies his son, Hun Manet, to succeed him in 2023.
The backdrop for resistance is bleak. While the trial of former CNRP President Kem Sokha drags on sporadically due to the Covid-19 pandemic, other longtime leaders, like Sokhua and her Paris-based contemporary Sam Rainsy, a CNRP co-founder, are stuck issuing public statements, writing op-eds and lobbying from abroad.

Although various smaller opposition parties have emerged, they hold no seats in the National Assembly and in many cases lack the name recognition that defined the CNRP.

These factors have created a leadership vacuum, experts say, with competing but perhaps complementary paths for opposition leaders who wish to do away with a regime that has ruled Cambodia for more than 35 years.

“Nobody lives forever,” said Sophal Ear, the associate dean of Arizona State University’s Thunderbird School of Global Management who specialises in Cambodian politics. “We’ve gotta think about what happens afterward, and that’s where we are.”
Five years into exile, Sochua, 67, spends her days in the American state of Rhode Island. She wakes early to drink a ginger and turmeric concoction before beginning video meetings, phone calls and email exchanges with dissidents and legislators around the world.

Her primary focus is lobbying for international sanctions against Cambodian government authoritarianism, such as the Cambodia Democracy Act and the Cambodia Democracy and Human Rights Act under consideration by the U.S. Congress. She also has taken up knitting.

“I call this a sweater for democracy,” she said, pulling a mess of baby-blue yarn from her bag. “It’s never perfect because I’m in the middle of a meeting, a very heated meeting, and I miss a stitch. But I don’t go back.” She laughed. “My poor children and grandchildren, they always have an imperfect sweater.”

Since her latest failed attempt to return to Cambodia last year, Sochua has faced the reality of trying to stay plugged into her home country from thousands of miles away. In late February, exiled CNRP leaders held a retreat in Florida to discuss strengthening their diplomatic ties and skills.

It’s a stark contrast from a decade ago, when she traversed the provinces to campaign and wielded immense popularity as a women’s rights defender trading public barbs and lawsuits with Hun Sen.

CNRP took its highest number of seats in years in a highly contested 2013 election that prompted thousands to protest the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) for months.

“I don’t think there will be a time you can bring, again, the mobilisation we had in 2014 when we (the CNRP) were there, the hundreds of thousands of people,” Sochua said.

Sochua named the most promising of the newly formed opposition groups the Candlelight Party, citing its breadth of campaigning. The party’s Acting President Thach Setha recently told Radio Free Asia (RFA) nearly 90% of CNRP members joined and the party had reestablished headquarters in every province.

Other notable resistance groups include the newer Cambodia Reform Party, led by former CNRP principals Ou Chanrath and Pol Ham, and the League For Democracy Party, which reached third in the 2018 general election. Six of the parties told RFA they planned to form a bloc before next year’s national election but currently lacked the resources.

Sochua said she doesn’t know who has the charisma to take the reins as a unified opposition leader. Out of fear of endangering them, she avoids contacting the ‘Friday Women’ or ‘Friday Wives,’ who are known for weekly marches calling for the release of detained relatives, and other domestic dissidents.

“That’s why it’s so key for Sam Rainsy to return and why they won’t allow it,” she said. “That’s why it’s so key for Mr. Kem Sokha to be free.”

The duo have been locked in public conflict as Sokha distances himself from the CNRP and new opposition groups, prompting some analysts to pronounce the breakup of the party.

Sochua brushed the possibility aside in favour of encouraging voters. If Cambodians are repeatedly reminded of freedom and democracy, she said, they will know their rights and change when elections arrive: “That’s when they can put that in action.”

“They’re not going to get the 43% that CNRP had,” she said, “but if they get 20% of the communes or the councillors at the commune level? It’s 20% versus zero.”
Sochua’s advice falls flat with Seng, an increasingly recognised and theatrical critic of Hun Sen’s regime who takes a more revolutionary view of opposition strategy.

Releasing an op-ed for a leading French newspaper in February 2022, Seng said she was interested in a more robust campaign of civic disobedience to bring about the kind of change Hun Sen’s government is currently settling into.

The Georgetown University-educated lawyer survived the Khmer Rouge killing fields as a child and was raised in the U.S. before returning to Cambodia in the 1990s, earning a public platform as a civil society leader and outspoken witness in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

Sophie Richardson, director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division, said she wouldn’t tell Cambodians to sit out elections, although the outcome “is already known.”

Expressions of outrage against the government would draw international attention to the need for fair, open elections, she said. Citizens could boycott elections and stop working. Women could shave their heads, a Cambodian sign of mourning adopted by the Friday Women protesters.

“However, to enable citizens to effectively and meaningfully participate in elections, the government must ensure that the elections held are free — meaning that they must take place without intimidation, corruption, or threats to citizens and with respect for their political freedoms — and fair — meaning that all the candidates must be treated equally and that the processes leading up to the vote and the count of ballots cast by the voters must be transparent,” she explained.

Opposition leaders have identified the NagaWorld casino protest as a broader resistance movement.

“Take a look at what we’re doing here and who we are joining,” Seng said.

Under a law allowing for elections in 2023, Seng said it’s important to have a political party in place, and that’s why she has kept going in her own way.

Despite invitations from leaders to join CNRP, Seng said she has declined offers to become part of any political organisation, frustrated with “a culture of always being in line.”

Yet she remains steadfast when the trial judge asked whether it was right to suggest toppling the government. “If it was not right, I would not have advocated for it till now,” Seng said.

Through symbolic outfits during her court appearances and outspoken, anti-government invectives rarely uttered within the Kingdom, Seng hopes to position herself as an invigorating resistance leader.

“If we’re not doing something, I don’t know what we’re doing here,” she said. “I see the future as women, I see the future as young.”

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Yet she denies having ambitions to start her own party. The 51-year-old wants Cambodians to eschew traditional politics and build a nonviolent, civil disobedience movement, particularly during the country’s high-profile 2022 ASEAN chairmanship.

Cambodian Centre for Human Rights Executive Director Chak Sopheap said her organisation does not determine whether citizens should engage in civil disobedience and emphasised that voting is a cornerstone of democracy.

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Some civil society leaders and international activists find Seng’s approach refreshing but have stopped short of condoning an election boycott. Brad Adams, executive director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division, said he wouldn’t tell Cambodians to sit out elections, although the outcome “is already known.”

“I would not personally want to give legitimacy to something that is completely illegitimate,” he said.

“I see the future as women, I see the future as young,” she said. “I look around and who else is that bridge? You can’t run an opposition political party via remote control from Paris.”

Seng lives with her two dogs in a rural part of Cambodia’s Kandal Province. The walls are lined with posters of incarcerated CNRP representatives and slain activists such as political analyst Kem Ley and union leader Chea Vichea.

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How should women in #Cambodia celebrate #InternationalWomensDay?

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Mech Dara @MechDara1 • 17h
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Celebrating 111th #InternationalWomensDay

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