
Mu Sochua defends women's rights against Cambodian government, 2010

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [1]
- [\(mainly or initiated by\) women](#) [2]
- [an example of paradox of repression](#) [3]
- [included participation by more than one social class](#) [4]

Timing

Time period notes:

Time period starts at Mu Sochua's declaration of refusing to pay the fine and ends when the court decided to deduct from her paycheck

2 June

2010

to:

15 July

2010

Location and Goals

Country:

Cambodia

Location City/State/Province:

Phnom Penh

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

To defend women's rights, human rights, and freedom of speech

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention>Mu Sochua hold a press conference declaring she will not pay the fine ordered by the court
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 024. Symbolic lights
- 038. Marches>Mu Sochua leads a march from the Supreme Court Building to the SRP headquarters and Royal Palace
- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments>Mu Sochua refuses to pay the fine ordered by the court
- 121. Refusal of public support>Mu Sochua's defiance undermines the supreme court
- 160. Reverse trial

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments›Mu Sochua refuses to pay the fine ordered by the court
- 121. Refusal of public support›Mu Sochua's defiance undermines the supreme court
- 160. Reverse trial

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments›Mu Sochua refuses to pay the fine ordered by the court
- 121. Refusal of public support›Mu Sochua's defiance undermines the supreme court
- 160. Reverse trial

Methods in 4th segment:

- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments›Mu Sochua refuses to pay the fine ordered by the court
- 121. Refusal of public support›Mu Sochua's defiance undermines the supreme court
- 160. Reverse trial

Methods in 5th segment:

- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments›Mu Sochua refuses to pay the fine ordered by the court
- 121. Refusal of public support›Mu Sochua's defiance undermines the supreme court
- 160. Reverse trial

Methods in 6th segment:

- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments›Mu Sochua refuses to pay the fine ordered by the court
- 121. Refusal of public support›Mu Sochua's defiance undermines the supreme court
- 160. Reverse trial

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions›The United Nations makes clear its disapproval of Mu Sochua's conviction
- 006. Group or mass petitions ›Mu Sochua's supporters and the Cambodian Women's Movement circulate petitions of support
- 090. Revenue refusal

Segment Length:

Approximately 7 days

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Mu Sochua
- members of the international and Cambodian community

- women from all walks of life in Cambodia

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Mu Sochua

Partners:

The Cambodian Women's Movement, the Sam Rainsy Party, other Cambodian politicians

External allies:

The United Nations, other members of the International Community

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- The Cambodian Women's Movement
- supporters of Mu Sochua's cause within the Cambodian community

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

The joining order of the United Nations and other members of the international community is not known

Segment Length:

Approximately 7 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Cambodian Courts

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Police blockades to prevent a march to the Royal Palace

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

7 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

Although Mu Sochua did not get the court to overturn its ruling, she succeeded in staying out of jail by rallying support behind her and raising awareness for her cause. She also succeeded in furthering the movement for women's rights in Cambodia. Sochua remained defiant until the last court deadline, and even after the court deducted from her paycheck she continued to campaign for her rights and the rights of all women. She was able to rally a large group of supporters behind her, and her cause planted the seed for the Cambodian Women's Movement.

Mu Sochua fled Cambodia during the genocide under Pol Pot in the 1970's. When she returned to her homeland in 1989 as a mother of three, Sochua began a tireless effort to further women's rights in Cambodia. At the start of her political career she served as Advisor of Women's Affairs to the Prime Minister, and from 1998 to 2004 was elected to Parliament and also served as Minister of Women's and Veterans' Affairs. In 2004, Sochua changed directions slightly by joining the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), the leading political opposition in Cambodia. By 2009, her career and work in women's rights has distinguished her as one of the most prominent women in Cambodia and one of the most politically active.

Unfortunately, given Cambodia's political history, Sochua's position as part of the leading opposition party to Prime Minister Hun Sen carried an implied vulnerability. Hun Sen won office as Prime Minister of Cambodia in 1993 when his coup ousted the popularly elected Prince Norodom Ranariddh. Sen proceeded to execute 40 of his political opponents, drawing little contrast to Cambodia's bloody political history prior to Hun Sen's rule. In the following 1998 election, Sen defeated the opposition leaders Prince Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy, earning himself more time in office despite being accused of voter fraud. Sen had a reputation of being very effective in 'getting rid' of his opponents, political or otherwise.

At a political meeting in April 2009, Prime Minister Sen reportedly made offensive remarks about Mu Sochua, calling her a 'strong leg' or 'gangster' and implying that she had unbuttoned her blouse in the presence of an officer. Mu Sochua, taking great offense to the Prime Minister's words, sued him for defamation, claiming that her actions were not just in defense of her own honor but also in defense of non-discrimination of Cambodian women.

In response to Sochua's lawsuit, Sen filed a counter lawsuit, claiming that Mu Sochua had defamed him. In June 2009, Sochua's case was taken to the Phnom Penh Municipal Court, where the judge dismissed it on lack of evidence. In August, the court declared that Mu Sochua was guilty of the charges filed against her by Prime Minister Sen, and she was fined 16.5 million riels (about \$4000).

Mu Sochua was not the first political opponent Sen had tried to destroy through accusations of defamation. In 2005 opposition leader Sam Rainsy was also convicted of defaming Hun Sen and was forced to flee to France. Rainsy was among a handful of activists and critics that Sen had also filed charges against in 2005 and 2006.

Mu Sochua appealed her case only to have the Court of Appeals reinforce the Municipal Court's ruling. Soon afterward her lawyer resigned due to political pressures from Hun Sen's party. Finally, on June 2, 2010, Mu Sochua appealed to the Supreme Court, taking her defensive stance with a new lawyer she had not chosen. The Supreme Court also upheld the rulings of the two previous courts, saying it did not accept Mu Sochua's defense. Sochua's hearing was held in a room packed with SRP's, foreign journalists and UN and EU representatives.

Immediately after the ruling, Mu Sochua held a press conference in both Khmer and English. She said that the

ruling had violated the right of every Cambodian, especially women, to justice and freedom of speech. She declared that she would not pay the fine, and was ready to march off to jail if that is what it came to. After her speech, Mu Sochua led a march from the Supreme Court building to the Royal Palace and SRP headquarters. Behind her followed a large and mixed crowd of supporters all carrying candles, the symbol for the SRP, and singing a Khmer song appealing the courage and pride of Khmers to defend their country. Riot police set up barricades to block the protester's path, and the group quietly surpassed them without incident.

Mu Sochua's decision not to pay the fine proved to be a popular stance. Soon after her conviction, a vast network of Cambodian women including sex workers, garment workers, students, teachers, vendors, public officials, and farmers formed a coalition behind her to support her cause. They circulated a petition, raised money and began gaining support from locals who opposed any imprisonment of Mu Sochua for exercising her right to free speech. In a few days they were able to raise the equivalent of \$6000, 2000 signatures from Cambodians across the country, a boost in media and radio coverage of their campaign.

Meanwhile, Mu Sochua raised awareness for her own cause by rallying the international community and drawing attention to her case. She gained a lot of sympathy from the international community including the UN, which claimed that the outcome of the case was a troubling indicator of the nature of democracy in Cambodia. Mu Sochua's supporters produced a second petition, which boasted signatures from the international community, and in July it was presented to President Barack Obama of the United States.

By July 15, the final deadline to pay the fine, international and national support for Mu Sochua's stance was very apparent. She reiterated once again that, in the name of human rights and justice, she would not pay the fine. However, on July 20, instead of sending her to jail, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court ordered the National Assembly to deduct a certain amount of money from Sochua's paycheck every month until the fine was paid.

Despite the fact that the court managed to attain its ends and avoid direct confrontation with the campaign surrounding Mu Sochua, the result of the mobilization of women behind Sochua turned out to be significant. The campaign that had been created in support of Mu Sochua's cause became known as the Cambodian Women's Movement, a group defending freedom of speech and women's rights. In addition, the group presented Mu Sochua with a portion of the money they had raised, the equivalent of about \$1000, and the petition they had circulated in support of her. The money was meant to help pay Sochua's fine, but instead, Sochua pledged, it would be dedicated to setting up a women's foundation and paying for education in law for women so that they would have the opportunity to actively defend their own rights. At the time of writing, Mu Sochua continues to work with the women's group to further women's rights in Cambodia.

Research Notes

Influences:

The women's rights movement in Cambodia (2)

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