

On the perils of resistance



“We won’t be able to fight this unless we unite”, said the activist monk Venerable But Buntenh to a small but significant group of Areng Valley residents, gathered under the hot sun at the local temple.¹ The monk had travelled to the remote valley with like-minded others in 2014, to show solidarity with local indigenous people fighting the proposed Cheay Areng Dam² – one of the many controversial, elite-backed dam projects in Cambodia.³ Together, the villagers and their allies staged various acts of resistance. Large trees in the valley were ordained by monks with saffron cloth to highlight the importance and value of the forest now being threatened by the dam. A blockade of the local access road was also implemented so that trucks associated with the Chinese dam-building company could not enter the area.⁴ Such actions escalated the anti-dam struggle, which soon gained national and international attention. For example, one hundred and fifty thousand Facebook ‘likes’ appeared rapidly on the profile-page of the main NGO involved in the campaign, a local group called Mother Nature [*Meada Tomechiet*]; and countless visitors began arriving in the Areng Valley to show their support, including young middle-class Khmers from Phnom Penh, and even opposition party members.

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THUS, THE SCENE WAS SET for a struggle between anti-dam campaigners and the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP). How has the CPP ‘dealt’ with the anti-dam movement, emerging from this isolated corner of the Cardamom Mountains? How has life in the Areng valley been affected by the campaign and the CPP’s response to it? What does this tell us about contemporary Cambodian politics, and prospects for grassroots resistance?

Ruling party tactics in the Areng Valley

In responding to these questions, a major recurring theme is that of divisions and divided-ness. First, this emerges in the CPP’s deployment of an intimate, village-level ‘divisive politics’ – a power play in which villagers are forced to take sides on the dam issue, and in which local discussion is remarkably reshaped along party-political lines. Never mind that the dam presents a grave moral and existential threat; such thoughts are shut down in what becomes a narrowly framed fight over villagers’ party allegiances. The second way in which divisions manifest is through the CPP’s use of forced, physical separations, which are often violently implemented. For example, by the end of 2015, two of the key anti-dam campaign leaders – a charismatic Khmer-speaking foreigner and a defiant local indigenous man – had been deported and jailed respectively.⁵ Thus, in the dynamics of the Areng Valley struggle, we can observe the CPP’s multi-pronged strategy of ‘divide and conquer’. This is a proven CPP strategy for maintaining dominance, which is now being applied to contemporary environmental movements, including struggles over water⁶ and land.⁷

To understand how the CPP’s divisive politics could gain traction in the Areng, it is necessary to explain something

of the valley’s geography and people. Indigenous *Chong* people have inhabited this part of the southern Cardamom Mountains for centuries. They were, in many ways, the ideal peasants, as imagined by King Sihanouk in his concept of the *Khmer Leu* or Upland Khmer, and later glorified by the Khmer Rouge in their Maoist-agrarian project that violently overran the valley. With the Vietnamese invasion, however, the valley was emptied of its population, and villagers only began to return to their homelands in the late 1990s or early 2000s. What they returned to was a mêlée of logging, soldier settlers, and other speculators interested in the valley’s natural resources including wildlife traders and international conservation groups.⁸ This history means that, although village life may seem unsullied at the outsider’s first glance, the valley is far from being a socially homogenous rural idyll.

Nevertheless, the heart of the valley is remarkable, and it is from here that the anti-dam campaign emerged – specifically, in the two villages of Chumnoab and Prolay. Although remote, visiting these villages has always been relatively easy. Houses are lined along the road, the population is almost entirely indigenous, people are welcoming, and there used to be a sense of social harmony. It is entirely possible for outsiders to become enchanted with this place, and its inhabitants, who lead a life entirely connected with the river, the surrounding forest, and the valley’s resident spirits. No wonder this area has been the hub of the campaign; and indeed, it is where Alex Gonzalez-Davidson (of Mother Nature) landed in 2011, initially as an intrepid Khmer-speaking visitor, on a bicycle. The place charmed and transformed him, and he in turn changed the village with the campaign against the dam that began slowly in 2012.

Villagers explained to me Alex’s role over the years, during my visit in 2015: “Alex made an impact upon the people here. He helped them to complain. He taught us about the impacts of hydro-power, and so we decided to protest ourselves”. In other words, Alex helped those local residents who silently opposed the dam (estimated by campaigners to be around two or three hundred people) to find their voice, and to discover the power of advocacy.

But not all local commentary was so kind, and not everyone was prepared to protest against the dam. This is because, as I indicated, the Areng is not homogenous, nor is it immune from the tentacles of the CPP apparatus, the party’s extractive interests, and the vagaries of village gossip. For example, at the northern tip of the valley lies an utterly remote indigenous village called Chumna. It was once described to me by an NGO colleague as “divided, like North and South Korea”. A cloud hangs here, of local rivalries never resolved, and of poverty and vulnerability. Villagers are cautious towards outsiders in Chumna, and probably for good reason: if things go wrong, there is no back-up. One’s survival in the face of rice shortages or illness hinges upon local reciprocity, patronage and kinship relationships, and the benevolence of the Village Chief. Indeed, the Chief sees the villagers as his children and grandchildren [*goan, jao*], who should behave accordingly. In this context, it is best not to rock the boat, and ‘advocacy’ [*thorsumatek*] is considered to be a dirty word.

I highlight these traditional Khmer and indigenous norms in the valley, because they have been cleverly captured and manipulated by the CPP. There is a neat overlay between the state and local indigenous leadership, which makes anti-dam resistance contingent upon those who are prepared to rock the boat. This means challenging not just state authority, but also the prevailing social order. Indeed, one of the main problems faced by dissenters is that they are made to feel like naughty children, as though they have crossed a moral line. This dynamic was painfully obvious in Prolay’s neighbouring village of Samraong, where the Village Chief is both a respected indigenous elder and an appointed CPP official (see photo). For this old man, who remembers the French colonial days, the CPP brought peace and stability to Cambodia; and as a loyal public official, he perceives that there is a ‘right way’ to do things in the village. When asked about Mother Nature and the dam, then, his reply was somewhat predictable: he said that the activists had made a grave error in not meeting with him, especially before their first gathering at the Prolay temple in 2013. This criticism of failing to follow protocol was echoed more generally by CPP-compliant others across the valley, in comments like: “They [Mother Nature] don’t relate to the authorities. It’s not good. They take the young people to go and learn, and change their ideas”. For indigenous elders like the village chief, the weight of these conventions made it virtually impossible to consider a deliberative process over the dam. Or, as the old man said with a tragic glint in his eye: “I follow the government. I do what they say”. He chose not to elaborate on the pain of losing his homeland, the place of his birth some eighty years ago.

For the villages of Prolay and Chumnoab, this CPP co-option of traditional leadership has resulted in social divisions that now seem irreparable. For example, the wife of one of the campaign sympathisers in Chumnoab explained to me: “Life here is not like before. It’s complicated now ... It’s like there are two groups in the village ... and people don’t respect the new Commune Chief. This problem comes from the dam. Before we always shared with each other, and people listened to the old Commune Chief”. Others also commented on the unravelling of village life, saying that it was hard to perform ceremonies and marriages in the village now, as the people were so divided. Everyone seemed to lament the loss of understanding between villagers, but there was no obvious solution. Instead there was a crisis in leadership, due to the new Commune Chief’s inability to remain neutral on the dam. As one informant explained to me: “There are two roads, and the Commune Chief must choose: if he helps the people to stop the dam, then he is ‘wrong’ with the government law. If he helps the law, then he is ‘wrong’ with his people. Both ways are wrong”. The result has been a muted Commune Chief, falling into step with the CPP, and failing his people.

Similar dynamics of confusion emerged around NGOs operating in the area at the time, often in association with the dam campaign. Some villagers said that the NGOs came to play political games, and “to do what they wanted, for their own benefit”. These accusations went hand-in-hand with rumours about how Mother Nature was supported by the opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). In fact, Alex and his movement were all ‘painted with that colour’ [*liep poah*]: if you associated with the anti-dam campaign, then you were presumed to be a CNRP supporter. Of course, Mother Nature campaigners denied that they had anything to do with party politics, but the paint stuck. For those tainted by the gossip, this meant subtle exclusion from social and political life in the village.

Above:
Local indigenous
Village Chief (left)
with long-term
NGO worker in
the area. Photo
by Sarah Milne.

Local politics and environmental struggle in Cambodia

For example, campaigners explained to me that they were no longer called by their leaders to attend village meetings: “They don’t call us because they’re scared that we’ll raise the issue of the dam”. Similarly, the dam campaigners were excluded from CPP-sponsored handouts in the village, such as those from the Cambodian Red Cross. Thus, the authorities conveyed a clear message to villagers: disobedience entails isolation and social risk.

While much of the local fall-out from the dam campaign seems like petty bickering, or an accidental crisis in local governance due to some misguided gossip, I was advised otherwise. As we debriefed on the Areng in 2015, my old colleague who had worked in the area for over a decade said: “They [the party] want Khmer people to be like that. It’s their strategy”. Indeed, I was also informed by campaigners in the valley that the local police were instructed by higher authorities to ‘paint’ people with gossip, calling into question their behaviour and party affiliation, in order “to create conflict inside the community, to break them”. And so the workings of the CPP and its divisive politics came into view. It is apparently easy to divide people, especially when they are geographically isolated and vulnerable. Indeed the Venerable But Buntenh, leader of the Independent Monk Network for Social Justice, must have known what was coming when he spoke to the Areng gathering in 2014: “we won’t be able to fight this unless we unite”.

Divide and conquer?

But the CPP’s ability to trigger local divisiveness does not guarantee it victory over the anti-dam campaign. Faced with a very public and emotive struggle against the dam, and still dealing with its 2013 election shock, the CPP employed other strategies too. Primarily, these have involved intimidation, and the physical removal of the anti-dam campaign leaders. As indicated, Alex, the leader of Mother Nature was deported from Cambodia in February 2015 – he has not yet been able to return to the country. Furthermore by late 2015, Ven Vorn, the main local indigenous leader from Chumnoab in the campaign, was arrested and sent

to the provincial gaol in Koh Kong.⁹ The charges against him were trumped up, and related to his use of timber for the construction of a ‘community house’ for meetings and visitors. He has only recently been released. Finally, although for apparently unrelated matters, the activist monk But Buntenh went into hiding in 2016, fearing for his safety.¹⁰ Thus, the ruling party has indicated that it is willing to flex its muscles against dissenters in a very public way.

Nevertheless, the party has also made efforts to appease popular demand, in what may be interpreted as a Polanyian ‘double movement’.¹¹ For example, the day after Alex’s deportation, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced that the Areng dam was to be put on hold until at least 2018; an announcement that came with the additional advice to would-be protesters and commentators: “now I beg you to stop talking about it”.¹² For campaigners against the dam, this was very good news. But contradictory government documents have recently surfaced, suggesting that dam construction will begin in 2018, and a mysterious road from the eastern side of the Cardamom Mountains into the area is currently being built by military engineers.¹³

Secrecy and uncertainty are therefore likely to prevail over the fate of the valley, which must be considered as one of Cambodia’s few remaining natural and cultural treasures. This means that the brave campaigners of the Areng will need to prepare themselves for a long haul, fighting against social and political forces that will relentlessly try to divide and silence them.

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Below:
Local people by the Areng river during the dry season. Photo by Sarah Milne.

