

60 minutes with IENG MOULY

Ieng Mouly is a veteran
campaigner on a mission to
make life better for his people
Van Rathavong



Ieng Mouly now heads the National AIDS Authority in Cambodia and is a member of the ruling Cambodian People's Party. Previously, he was Information Minister as well as the chair of the Cambodian Mine Action Centre before being appointed the first vice chair for the Agriculture and Rural Development Council. In an interview with *Khmer Times*, he spoke of his work in combatting AIDS, his experiences brokering the Paris Peace Agreement as well as his views on some of the country's current issues.

KT: What are your plans moving forward with the National AIDS Authority?

Ieng Mouly: We are now a victim of our own success. We progress in every field, so now external funding is declining. The objective is to reach a level where 90 percent of the people are 90 percent tested and 90 percent of them receive medicine. Now we are at 80 percent, but we are still optimistic.

One of our concerns are mother to child HIV transmission.

We are also concerned about entertainment workers who have more than seven customers a week – their transmission rate is high. So we have to educate them more on prevention and encourage people to use a condom. We have a policy of 100 percent condom use because fighting against this there is only two solutions.

First is you test and if you're safe, then you use a condom to protect yourself. But if you're infected then you should get treatment because it's free.

KT: What support and strategies do you have to reach those most vulnerable?

Ieng Mouly: We work with central decision policy and give more to national level district and communes so communes and districts can go identify how many in the village are affected by HIV and if they need support they let us know and we will provide support.

Second, we have to identify people living with HIV as poor people so we distribute ID Poor to them so they can go hospital and receive treatment without paying.

This is a very big achievement and also relates to the decentralization we are working with the Interior Ministry to include fighting against HIV-AIDS in what we call Safety And Security Communication. This is so that people at all levels in districts and provinces etc know what they have to do.

KT: How do you deal with the stigma involved against people who are HIV positive?

Ieng Mouly: We work with the Education Ministry and the Labour Ministry and they have their teams go to explain to the people and work with the police and the military police to understand that people living with HIV are victims and we must help and support them.

Also, with people working in the entertainment industry especially. If they are arrested, for example, for public disorder, they must be able to receive treatment.

KT: You have a very interesting political background. Can you tell us about that?

Ieng Mouly: In 1982 I left Paris to go to the Thai border to join the Khmer People's National Liberation Front with former Prime Minister Son Sann. We were fighting the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

During this period of fighting I was the secretary-general of the KPNL. After that the KPNL transformed into a political party called the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party. I was vice-president and Son Sann was president. We got 10 seats after the 1993 elections and after that I became Information Minister.

Later in 1998 I formed the Buddhist Liberal Party and contested the general election, but we lost. Then in 2007 I joined the CPP. After the general election, people were accusing the CPP of being a puppet of the Vietnamese, but I believe in the party because we have our constitution and the monarchy and there is a plural party system with democratic values.



So I don't think I needed to form another party for myself. If you form a party it means that you in one way want to become prime minister, but for me I just wanted to serve my country in any position.

I also found that what the opposition said about the CPP, that it was like a dictatorship, to be untrue. The party actually has a lot of qualified people and it has a strong leadership. You can participate in a debate and establish your views, so I feel the CPP is really democratic, more so than other parties who only pretend to be democratic.

During CPP meetings, the members are advised to express all their views, even the negative points, and not just talk about positive things or praises. We can say anything in the CPP, especially if we want to raise an issue that may not be so good or contrary to the party's objective.

KT: When you say other parties pretend to be democratic, are you referring to the CNRP?

Ieng Mouly: I refer to other parties who always pretend that they are the more democratic party and accuse the CPP of being a dictatorship. I feel very comfortable in the CPP because I can say what I want to say, I can express my views and I have a strong sense of discipline in the party. Once we have a resolution, we all have to respect the resolution.

KT: What was it like being one of the Cambodians brokering the Paris Peace Agreement?

Ieng Mouly: There are two factors that helped put an end to the conflict in 1991. First it was the beginning of negotiations between King Norodom Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen. The breakthrough was because previously, their positions were very contradictory.

Second was because now we had the support of the global community, especially the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Without their support it would've been very hard. But ultimately, there was consensus to bring all these things together.

For me, my strategy was to support the five members of the Security Council. Why did I support them? Because I knew that we didn't have a strong enough military to force people to do anything. So the best way was to go along with the international community.

Anytime they proposed an initiative, I would support it. This was also a differing point between me and my former Prime Minister Son Sann.

I was keen to hold an election in Cambodia, but he was hesitant. Sometimes he would want to delay the elections because he would want to try and get along with the Khmer Rouge, and the Khmer Rouge didn't want the country to have an election.

If they held an election [the Khmer Rouge] will lose, so they wanted to continue negotiating power sharing. This put me and Son Sann at different ends. Because I supported the electoral process, but Son Sann was not very happy with me so we split.

The catalyst of the split was because one party wanted to have an election and the other party clearly did not. Some of the challenges of the agreement was getting everyone on the Cambodian side to be willing to talk to each other.

That's why getting King Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen to talk was a breakthrough. One side will accuse King Sihanouk's side of something and another one will accuse the other side of being a puppet to Vietnam. I personally didn't want to hear much about that.

KT: One of the stipulations in the Paris Peace Agreement was to have free and fair elections, yet there were accusations of electoral fraud.

Ieng Mouly: Even when [US President Donald] Trump won in the recent election, he still complained that it wasn't fair because he lost the popular vote. It all comes down to you rhetoric. I understand why the CNRP may say that the election was not free and fair because every time before the results are out, they will proclaim that they have won.



How do they know they've won before the results are out? They proclaim before the election so that they have a motive to complain after the fact, to manifest strikes and such. At every polling station, there is a representative from every party, so the opposition actually had three representatives there.



One from the Sam Rainsy Party, one from the Human Rights Party and one from the CNRP. They had six representatives in each bureau and the CPP only had two. And after the ballots were counted, they signed the form to say they accepted the results, so this is just their tactic because when they complain there isn't fairness in the election, it makes the Cambodian public angry against the CPP. This will mobilise them and create a colour revolution. Their objective is to create a revolution.

KT: What was it like being Information Minister in the '90s?

Ieng Mouly: Back then, our journalists and newsmen weren't really well informed, so everyone was learning from each other. Now I can see the progress. But the one thing I tell my people not to forget as a journalist is not to believe that what you write is the truth – you must always fact check.

If you talk about somebody and if you feel somebody has done something wrong, don't draw a conclusion without first asking this person to respond. But now corruption is still a problem. Sometimes people want to be a journalist, but when they cover activities like logging or illegal fishing and people pay them, then they stop reporting on the issue.

Things like that exist. That's why this industry may not seem attractive to young people.

KT: How do you think the government or media organizations should deal with corrupt journalists?

Ieng Mouly: The government could introduce a law and ask them to uphold ethics. But it's difficult because if you are poor and you're not paid well and you're not well-educated, you will be willing to do anything, even bribery. In the '90s we faced this too.

We asked them to get more training but still, their living conditions weren't so good. It's linked to economic conditions and also they need to get more education or professional training. That's why they should visit many other countries and learn from them.

KT: Having been Information Minister, what is your response to Cambodia dropping in the Press Freedom Index?

Ieng Mouly: First, we have to recognise that if you talk about Cambodia compared to our neighbouring countries, I feel that we are still better.

Journalists here are free. If you go to Laos or Vietnam, they don't even have an opposition party, so how are they free?

Here we have an opposition party and other parties and organizations like Radio Free Asia who are like an opposition radio station who broadcast negative information about the ruling party.

They are not fair, they are not independent, they are just a political radio station.

You have to realise that we just emerged from a decade of war and genocide – we lost all our intellectuals. We only started real peace in 1998. So compared with the other countries, we just emerged, so we're actually not so bad. Of course, we can improve, but we have to start somewhere.

