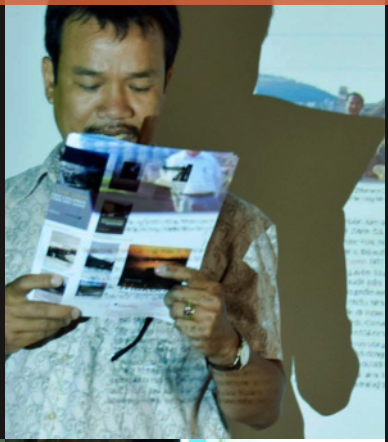
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WINNING IN THE SHADOWS

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Kem Sokha leaves Cambodia's overseas opposition bewildered

For most of the past decade, Kem Sokha has been the symbol of resistance to former Prime Minister Hun Sen's rule over Cambodia, staying in the country as many of his colleagues ran away or went to prison. But that image has been badly tarnished over the past couple of months.











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Winning in the shadows: The story of a ‘secret’ literary prize in Vietnam

By Hướng Thiện

At the 10th Viet Literature Prize in 2024, which was open to Vietnamese-language writers around the world, a collection of poems by a young poet won the unanimous backing of the five-member jury: literary critic Lý Đợi, writer and Facebooker Thái Hạo, poet Ý Nhi, poet and painter Giáng Vân, and novelist Nguyễn Đức Tùng. The collection was named winner in the poetry category.

Yet unlike the winners in the other categories of that edition (prose, criticism, translation and the chairman's special award), neither the poet nor the winning collection was revealed.

On the prize's official website, the organizers said they would announce the winner's name "at an appropriate time."

Two years on, the author and the poems remain a mystery to the public.

The secrecy is not without reason. The organizers learned hard lessons early on. The caution dates back to 2018, when a young winner was harassed by police after accepting the prize. In 2022, another young winner was dissuaded by police from attending the award ceremony in Hồ Chí Minh City. On his way to the airport, he was reportedly beaten by strangers in

front of police officers, for no apparent reason, and missed his flight and the ceremony. Since then, the organizers have decided to withhold the names of young winners who are living inside Vietnam to keep them safe.

"To avoid disadvantaging talented writers, and to avoid leaving gaps in the prize's record, the award-winning authors whose names are being temporarily withheld will be announced by Văn Việt at an 'appropriate time,'" says Nguyễn Viện, a writer based in Hồ Chí Minh City and a member of the jury of the poetry category.

The prize was officially launched in 2016 by the Independent Writers Club, or Văn Việt for short, a collective established in 2014 by 61 intellectuals led by the eminent writer Nguyên Ngọc, a former colonel and former deputy of the National Assembly. It has never received recognition from the Vietnamese government.

Despite the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of association, Vietnam does not allow fully independent nongovernment organization. While the motto "Independence — Freedom — Happiness" has headed Vietnam's official documents since 1945, the government grows wary of "independence" when anyone

outside the state claims it. A legally recognized collective must be affiliated with a state agency and, once approved, needs permission for every single project. Yet Nguyên Ngọc and his colleagues have refused to compromise their autonomy, undeterred by shrinking civil liberties. They have founded the collective without registration, published banned books on their own website, brought politically sensitive news stories to public attention, raised their own funds, held annual awards and connected with Vietnamese-language writers and enthusiasts overseas. Staying unauthorized, however, does not mean enjoying unfettered freedom. Despite risks, the group continues its work true to their slogan, "for a free and humane Vietnamese literature," to prevent literary talents from fading into oblivion.

The 'problematic' collective

The founding members of the group have been known as prominent dissidents both within and outside the Party. Nguyên Ngọc, a 94-year-old writer, left the party in 2018 in solidarity with his friend, Chu Hảo, an intellectual and former deputy minister of science and technology, who was disciplined due to having published what the party deemed as inappro-

priate books. Nguyên Ngọc also used to be the vice president of the Hanoi Writers Association, a de-facto state-led organization, yet left in 2015 as he observed discrimination against members who wanted to join the group of independent writers.

This group of intellectuals played a leading role in organizing protests in the past against China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea, circulated petitions on numerous state policies, and called for justice for unjustly arrested intellectuals. They have also sought to create a transnational literary movement. Some sections of their website are dedicated to literary works published during the Republic of Vietnam (1955–1975) as well as diaspora literature, part of an effort to foster reconciliation among Vietnamese people across the world, something the government has failed to deliver on despite its rhetoric.

For Nguyễn Đức Tùng, a jury member and a winner of the 2017 edition, writing and researching Vietnamese literature is like "reuniting with the Vietnamese language," the mother tongue he tried to unlearn after arriving in Canada as a boat person in the 1980s, when he had to adopt English as his main language.

While group has never received any written notice

from the authorities ordering it to disband, harassment is common: naming and shaming by both state media and cybertroopers, security agents "inviting" members for coffee, police tailing public gatherings of members, harassment against relatives of writers published on the website, firewalling of the website inside Vietnam, and more. A 2023 article on the outlet of Đồng Nai police called it a "self-styled professional body that was "founded unlawfully."

Many members have left for various reasons, but all out of pressure, says Ngô Thị Kim Cúc, in charge of the prose section on the website and also a jury member.

"One director was pressured to withdraw because, if they did not remove their name, they would not receive state funding to make films," she says. "Some withdrew for the sake of their own work, others for the sake of their children's jobs. However, withdrawing their names usually did not change the relationship: many of them continued to contribute writing or still took part as usual in Văn Việt's activities."

Like most activists on the government watch list, Nguyễn Quang A, the main sponsor of the event since its first edition, has periodically been "invited for coffee" by the police. Nguyễn Quang A says that in a

recent meeting this summer, the police warned him that he must take responsibility if any of the winning works were found to be problematic.

But he appears unfazed. A seasoned democracy activist, tech entrepreneur and translator of numerous treatises, he is well aware of the risks involved. He left the party in 1993.

The Institute for Development Studies, which he founded, voluntarily disbanded in 2009 in defiance of Decision 97 issued by the then prime minister: "If there are dissenting opinions regarding the Party's and the State's orientations, guidelines, or policies, such opinions must be submitted to the competent Party or State authorities and must not be made public under the name of, or associated with the name of, a science and technology organization."

"Whatever is our right, we should exercise it," says Nguyễn Quang A. "The majority of real civil society actors are unregistered."

Unwanted ceremonies

The award ceremony is always held on March 3, on the occasion of World Writers' Day and the anniversary of the declaration establishing the Independent Writers Group of Vietnam. The award is judged

mainly on creativity and innovation. Winning entries are selected from works published on the club's website or nominated by individuals who have collaborated with the club.

"In a country that calls itself socialist or communist, a writer is synonymous with a soldier on the cultural front," says Nguyễn Viện, the writer and poetry juror. "Their writing is, to a greater or lesser degree, shaped by the policies and line of the Party and the state. All books and periodicals are published under a strict system of censorship. As a result, their work always stays within set bounds, in both form and content. Faced with this stagnation and formulaic writing, Văn Việt has promoted independent thinking and a free consciousness, in order to give works of genuine innovation and creativity a chance to reach the public."

Hoàng Thị Ý Nhi, editor of the Văn Việt website and one of the jury members, says the club has been able to "adapt" to the ongoing challenges and avoid unnecessary trouble.

"Security officers turning up to stop us from getting to the award venue, or from meeting friends for coffee, happens fairly often. They are very young men, and their manner is relatively polite. We under-

stand that this is the task they've been given and that they have to carry it out efficiently."

The 2017 ceremony now seems a distant memory. According to many, it was the best organized, with every required formality going off smoothly. The winners delivered their acceptance speeches candidly and with composure. It was a ceremony without any interference.

The first ceremony was supposed to be held at a café, but the owner backed out at the last minute, citing "unspoken pressure." The group scrambled and carried the event to the home of Ý Nhi, one of the jury members. Then the power failed, and the ceremony went on in the heat. In later years, her house remained the fallback whenever something went wrong at the last minute.

For recent editions, the ceremonies have had to be held virtually. Adhering to an "independence, not opposition, dialogue and not dissent" approach, the group says on its website that they invited members of the official Writers' Association to their award ceremonies but received no response.

Yet harassment is not the only worry of organizers and jury members for future editions of the prize.

"Whether the government permits it or not, Văn

Việt will still evaluate and award prizes every year," says Nguyễn Viện. "What I'm concerned about is that we may lack the participation of young writers. Participating on the Văn Việt forum is a test of each person's courage. Especially for younger groups of authors, they are more likely to face pressures from the authorities."

The prize consists of a cash award ranging from $500 to $2,000 and a certificate signed by club president Nguyên Ngọc.

"Some [winners] withdrew their names very early on. Others gladly accepted but later notified us of their refusal," says editor Hoàng Thị Ý Nhi. "In some cases, everything had already been finalized (the selected poems had been posted, along with the jury's comments and the laureate's acceptance speech) before they wrote asking us to take the posts down. We understand and respect their decisions. Fortunately for us, the overwhelming majority of those selected agreed to accept the award. Because of this difficult choice, they have faced a great many hardships in their lives."

Many winners of the award have donated to social causes. The winner of the first edition for his collection of personal essays, music composer and indepen-

dent writer Nguyễn Tuấn Khanh, dedicated the award to a 15-year-old who was sentenced to 30 months in prison for blocking and injuring a police officer forcibly confiscating his family's land.

"I dedicate this award to Nguyễn Mai Trung Tuấn as a call for society to pay greater attention to the irregularities of Vietnam's judiciary, of which Tuấn's case is one example," Nguyễn Tuấn Khanh wrote in his letter to Văn Việt accepting the award. "It shows how the power and treachery of a small group of people can tear apart the country's decent face and destroy the traditional morality of the Vietnamese people in the eyes of the world."

Producing real literature in times of red writing

Nguyễn Viện says most of his major works have been published overseas to steer clear of top-down censorship. Văn Việt is neither the first nor the only forum inside the country and yet outside the government's control that the writer has been part of.

"Nearly all my books, about 20 titles so far, have come out in the U.S.," he says. "The reason is simple: They can't be printed in Vietnam, so I get them printed in America. I couldn't bear to let all that writing go to waste."

His winning novel, Dancing to Die, is an example. It was published by a Vietnamese diaspora publishing house before the entire version was put on the website of Văn Việt.

The winner of the 2020 edition was in the same boat. In 2010, Phạm Thanh Nghiên was sentenced to four years in jail and three years under house arrest on charges of anti-state propaganda, primarily for her protests against China's illegal sovereignty claims over the Paracel and Spratly Islands, as well as her blogging on human rights. Her winning memoir, Slices of Life Behind Bars, was completed shortly after her release from prison and published in the U.S. as a bilingual book to escape censorship in Vietnam. Unbeknownst to her, it was also published underground by her close friend Phạm Đoan Trang, who wanted to give her a surprise gift.

According to Phạm Thanh Nghiên, hers is the second memoir of a prisoner of conscience published inside Vietnam while the author was still in the country. The first was a memoir by Thích Thiện Minh, a fighter for religious freedom in Vietnam who was imprisoned for 26 years.

Over the years, Văn Việt has grown beyond serving as a platform for sharing literary works. It has be-

come a forum where questions of justice — often overlooked or deliberately omitted by mainstream media and literature — are finally given voice. Many pieces by people from marginalized groups who were not professional writers have found a home on the website: a poem by a death-row inmate who was unjustly imprisoned for 20 years, letters from prison by a land-rights activist, and the final statement of a prominent journalist at her show trial.

Sorrowful nights
Where has the truth gone now?
I have searched in vain.
My body is all frail
yet my wrists are in chain.

What can I do with this cruel, tangled wrong
an injustice that won't explain itself?
In the dead of night, my heart breaks
as I write,
sending these words out like a lantern
Please, friends, hear me and help me.

Speak up for justice.
Part the clouds and lift the sky's own judgment,

so righteousness can be made to answer.
Help me soon—
so I can be cleared of every stain of blame.

Thirteen long years have carved my life with pain.
Tell me—where is justice?
My life is branded with guilt
in a midnight cell,
alone—one room, one iron cuff, one cage of silence.

My body hurts;
my spirit aches more.
Tears blur my eyes—tears for the suffering of my child.
A life turned solitary by wrongful verdicts.
I am alive with innocence—
I try to keep my heart clean.

When the moon returns, it casts
the shadow of an entire life behind bars.
Soon, I will leave this world
And then, perhaps
this world will finally stop hurting.
I carry my sorrow like a prayer,
crying into the heavens: I did no wrong.

The hatred I've carried all my life
has not yet found its answer.
A soul condemned by error—
truth and falsehood will not simply fade away.
I wander, I call, I plead—
how can no one hear?
Break the walls of lies.7
Open a path through everything
that blocks my name—
so that one day, I can be proven innocent.

In 2023, despite calls for justice from rights groups at home and abroad and from the broader Vietnamese public, the government went ahead with the execution of Lê Văn Mạnh from Thanh Hóa province. It notified his family only four days after the execution, denying them a final opportunity to see him. A few days before his execution, he managed to send out a poem from prison and expressed his gratitude to those who had supported him.

"We are gradually expanding the website in the hope that Văn Việt will take on the look and stature of a cultural forum," says Hoàng Thị Ý Nhi. "That will be the reason we gain more contributors and more readers, and it will lead to better prize seasons

ahead."

In 2025, the Best Prose prize went to Ái Điểu for her collection of short stories The Scent of the Mortal Realm, which was published solely on Facebook before being republished on the Văn Việt website.

Yet nobody in the jury nor the organizers knows who the author is. Văn Việt respects her right to be hidden. But her anonymity sparks heated online debate as to whether the prize was actually given to AI.

"In this case of the hidden identity, some have remarked that the jury was 'irresponsible' for giving the prize to someone who cannot be held accountable," says Nguyễn Viện. "But I actually think it's a good thing, because it shows the jury was completely objective and favored no author. Not for achievements, personal background, fame, or obscurity."

In an exclusive interview after winning the Văn Việt prize with "New Century Magazine," an exile outlet in Vietnamese language, Ái Điểu, who was discovered to be a non-professional writer based in An Giang province, says: "I hide my identity so that I can write freely about the pain of the wretched lives around me. … I live in my home country, where freedom of expression is not respected. I have to remain anonymous to avoid being fined, banned from writ-

ing, or having my livelihood adversely affected."

When will be the 'appropriate time'?

A wave of online public denunciations has emerged against works that depart from established party conventions, including the highly acclaimed The Sorrow of War, an international bestseller translated into more than 15 languages. The book, which follows a North Vietnamese veteran haunted by memory and trauma, much like its author Bảo Ninh, cuts against the official image of victory and was banned in Vietnam for more than a decade. The Ministry of Education and Training banned schools from teaching the novel shortly after a denunciation campaign.

Restrictions continue to tighten through a series of laws and decrees. Resolution 80-NQ/TW, issued by the Politburo in January, designates November 24 as "Vietnam Culture Day," with the stated policy that workers get the day off with full pay. The resolution sets a goal of placing Vietnam among the world's top 30 in soft power by 2045. But it also stresses "building a cultural posture integrated with national defense and security, firmly safeguarding the Party's ideological foundation."

Issued last December, Decree 350/2025/NĐ-CP, which aims to encourage the development of literature, places literature under unified state management by the government nationwide. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism is thereby tasked with helping the government carry this out.

Decree 126 on organizing, operating and managing associations further restricts registration of not-for-profit entities to only those with good "political and moral qualities."Directive 24 of the Politburo in 2024 also calls for close monitoring of entities that receive foreign funding.

The group appears to have anticipated this obstacle early on. All contributors and collaborators are unpaid, and only domestic donations are accepted.

"In the first few years, friends and colleagues overseas sent in small contributions, according to their goodwill and circumstances," says Hoàng Thị Ý Nhi. "However, to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings, we soon stopped accepting these contributions."

Even so, Văn Việt has been accused of plotting a "Jasmine Revolution" and urging writers to take to the streets, as in the Arab Spring uprisings.

For its members, writing freely is non-negotiable. As Nguyễn Viện wrote in his winning novel Dancing

to Die: “The longing for liberation, and the journey toward it, belong only to those who are already free. But freedom, in turn, belongs only to those capable of liberating themselves.”

“I am a free writer and will always be free,” he says. “To the young people who feel the pull of writing: do not be afraid.”

“Write whatever you want, and write whatever you can. Only when we break our chains will we become free. And only in freedom can dignity and true creativity come into being.”

Exiled writer Phạm Thanh Nghiên agrees.

“Keep in mind that when you write, that whatever happens what you’re doing is right and good, there’s nothing wrong. With that kind of mindset, you’ll feel steadier if one day you have to face things that don’t go as expected.”

Do you want to go to heaven?

Then don’t listen to anyone’s promises.

Prooooooooomiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiises,

random, careless, full of nonsense.

Whoever deceives you or threatens you is a bunch of live grenades.

You’ll blow up before you reach glory.

No one but yourself can bring you to heaven.

So you need to breathe well

and not let yourself run a fever.

But to breathe well, nothing beats freedom, and looking after your own supply of clean air

in a life as transparent as a brick,

carefree like going for a swim, like going out to play,

aimless, drifting,

afraid of losing nothing.

That means you have to be stubborn,

though not necessarily sensational.

Greed, anger and delusion are just your own pen and stable.

If you can walk out of that rot, you already have half a heaven,

romantic as clouds, as trees, thriving, dizzy with bliss.

And when you give away the rest of yourself, all of heaven is within you.

There's a secret I can tell without making anyone sick:

heaven is only emptiness,

not a place for waiting, hoping, and watching the road.

— A poem by Nguyễn Viện



Kem Sokha leaves Cambodia's overseas opposition bewildered

By Colin Meyn

Prak Panh jumped aboard Kem Sokha's political movement just as the Human Rights Party was getting started almost 20 years ago. Sokha, a celebrated human rights activist, had recently been released from prison, and Prak had just returned from a trip to Cambodia that left him feeling despondent.

When Sokha came through Prak's hometown of Houston, Texas, in 2008, promising to bring democracy to Cambodia, he was all in. The doughnut shop owner said he has helped to "keep the message going" ever since.

Prak helped build the network of overseas support as the party became a formidable force within Cambodia; cranked up his efforts around the massive 2013 election campaign rallies and demonstrations that followed; then flew to Cambodia to join the 2017 commune elections, Sokha's last before being placed under house arrest on dubious charges of conspiring with the United States to topple Cambodia's government.

For most of the past decade, Sokha has been the symbol of resistance to former Prime Minister Hun Sen's rule over Cambodia, staying in the country as many of his colleagues ran away or went to prison.

But that image has been badly tarnished over the past couple of months.

In May, Sokha received a royal pardon that lifted his conviction, but left intact the court-imposed lifetime ban on political participation. Weeks later, Kem Monovithya, his daughter and a former senior opposition official herself, joined the government her father had long fought against, as a special envoy in the foreign ministry. The Sokha family was photographed meeting with Hun Sen on August 16. He called Monovithya "an excellent human resource for the nation."

Prak, like many opposition supporters, is struggling to explain the developments. Sokha's health has been declining, he said, and the pardon allowed him to travel to the U.S. in October to get medical treatment. As for Monovithya, maybe she sees a real opportunity to use her experience as a diplomat to help Cambodia, he suggested.

"I'm not gonna sugarcoat it," he said in a phone call. "It's a bad look. There's no doubt about that. But I don't know what's inside her heart, you know?"

Others in the pro-democracy movement have come to a harsher conclusion.

"That's called political suicide," said Muong

Nareth, a former Radio Free Asia personality who now hosts an online news show about Cambodian politics from his home in Long Beach, California.

"I feel like she has no kind of future strategy whatsoever," he added over the phone. "It's just like an opportunist, and then when the situation or opportunity avails itself, then grab it. And then she forgets all about the rest of the folks who have been fighting and supporting her all along."

Nareth recently drew the ire of Prime Minister Hun Manet, Hun Sen's son, who publicly mocked the commentator over his coverage of alleged Thai border encroachments, which the opposition accuses the government of failing to push back against.

The journalist said he still respects Sokha for his contributions to the fight for human rights and democracy, but feels like he "killed" his legacy. "He just gave in because Hun Sen cracked him, and that's the saddest part, right?"

Mu Sochua joined forces with Kem Sokha when the Human Rights Party merged with the Sam Rainsy Party ahead of the 2013 election, forming the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). The former CNRP vice president now heads the nominally independent Khmer Movement for Democracy, and said she has

"no idea" what Sokha is doing.

"The fact that Mona also came into the picture at the same time? It has to be a deal," she said in a phone call from Providence, Rhode Island, referring to Monovithya.

"Why would he deal a deck that gives him no real viable cards?" she added of Sokha. "I don't know."

Sochua said she crossed paths with Monovithya in Geneva, Switzerland, where they were both attending an October 2 United Nations human rights meeting focused on Cambodia.

"I represent the diaspora, advocating for what, for human rights, for rule of law. She told me she's advocating for the rights of the internally displaced people on the border. Huh? Because she works for Hun Manet," Sochua said. "So forget about the rest. Forget about free and fair elections."

Monovithya, asked via email for comment on the criticism, said she "can only give information on the issues of my mandate which is the border conflict and to some extent investment promotion in Europe." She declined an interview request.

Opposition divided

Like Prak Panh, Rithy Oung was in on the ground

floor of the Human Rights Party. He recalls urging Kem Sokha to start the party during a meeting in Washington, D.C. before it launched. Oung was already a trailblazing figure in the Cambodian-American community, having been elected to the city council in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1999.

Prak and Rithy helped build a network of HRP supporters that eventually turned into CNRP-USA, an organization that helped fund Kem Sokha's activities. A separate group, CNRP-North America, served the same purpose, but was started by longtime Rainsy backers. A brief effort to merge the two sides fell apart before the 2013 election was even held.

In 2018, Rithy, then the president of CNRP-USA, led a new merger push, combining with CNRP-North America to form a third organization, CNRP-America. Some Kem Sokha diehards, including Prak and Monovithya, opposed the move.

Prak says the Rainsy faction never viewed Sokha's backers as equal partners, and wasn't willing to commit to fair power-sharing arrangements. Rithy, who now leads the merged CNRP-America, said it made sense to join forces and pool resources.

"I still have faith in CNRP and I believe in unity. If you want to really bring justice, freedom, and

democracy back in Cambodia, we have to work together as the parties that believe in the cause," he said in a phone call from Lowell.

After the merger in 2018, the CNRP held a world conference in Atlanta, Georgia, where members elected Rainsy to serve as the party's interim president until Sokha had his political rights restored. Sokha had taken the mantle after Rainsy fled the country under a torrent of legal threats.

Rithy said Sokha was always welcome back into his leadership role, if conditions allow and he's "willing to speak for the people."

"I don't support what he does, but I can't control his decision," Rithy said of Sokha.

With Cambodia's democratic space closed off for now, Rithy and the CNRP have largely turned their focus to organizing outside the country.

Rainsy, who formed his eponymous party in 1995 after a brief stint as Cambodia's finance minister, announced the formation of the "Independent Cambodian Government of October 23" on that date last year, marking the anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords that created a framework for democracy in 1991.

Rainsy now leads the government-in-exile, with a

cabinet that includes prominent opposition members from across the overseas diaspora.

To mark the anniversary this year, opposition members met in France to swear in members of the Khmer Overseas Citizens' Assembly. Its first act was unanimously endorsing the mandate of Rainsy's government.

The 47-member Assembly is composed of Cambodian pro-democracy activists from around the world; 15 seats for the U.S., 10 for Europe, six each from Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and two each from Japan and South Korea. Elections were held online during the first two weeks of October.

Seng Sophoan, president of the Khmer Overseas Election Commission, which organized the vote, said about 2,000 overseas Cambodians cast a ballot out of some 3,400 who registered. He said 63 candidates were approved to participate. Six applicants were rejected, he added, either because they did not have the required two years of previous democratic experience, or because they "have connections with Hun Sen."

Asked if those parameters were rather undemocratic, he explained the nine-member commission took a majority vote on each applicant. "So I have to

respect that," he said during a stopover on his return trip from France to Canada, where he lives.

Sophoan hosted a series of debates between candidates that were posted to YouTube and Facebook. Assembly members range in age from 24 to 80-plus years old, he noted.

Keep it moving

Prak, from Houston, is not excited about Rainsy's government or the overseas assembly.

"I don't support it and I don't agree with it, because if you really look at it, I mean, which country are you representing?" he said.

"I think what they should be focused on is trying to unite all the opposition party," he added. "Because if you really look at it, he's not united anybody. It's just his own group of people."

Sochua, who heads the Khmer Movement for Democracy (KMD), said it's crucial to keep some momentum going, one way or another. The government-in-exile allows politically motivated members of the Cambodian diaspora to stay engaged, she said.

She started the KMD as a nonpartisan alternative to the CNRP, because many like-minded overseas Cambodians are worried about associating with a

group that the actual government describes as terrorists. Sochua accused the ruling party of threatening to block people associated with the CNRP from returning to the country, or even revoking their citizenship.

"Even in the pagodas, the monks are not supposed to have us come and talk about politics. That is very, very clear. Many people now are very careful about not being seen with us because they say, 'Oh, we have to go home. It's not that we don't believe in you,'" she said.

Cambodia's Ambassador to America, Koy Kuong, is a regular presence at the large Khmer pagoda just outside Washington D.C. Speaking from the main prayer hall during Pchum Ben celebrations, he said Sochua's claims were "100% false."

"You know, I work here for all people. You know, my direct telephone on the website, on the Facebook, or the Cambodian community calling me — we just ask, how can I help you? I never ask what political affiliation you belong to," he said.

He said declining support for the opposition was its own fault.

"They lie to the Cambodian community again and again, and then the Cambodian community realizes it's lies; they know their propaganda is not true,"

Kuong said, claiming the government only wants to unite Cambodians of all stripes.

Asked how that squared with the government banning many opposition figures from politics, Kuong said, "everything is according to the law."

"Cambodia has no political prisoners, but Cambodia has politicians commit crimes, you know. So law is law. We try, you know, why not unify? Kem Sokha, before, and now they come to us. We accept. The government accepts," he added.

Sochua thinks the government's arrangement with Sokha was meant to remove the ruling party's most formidable foe from the playing field ahead of commune elections next year and national elections in 2028.

While the government has come up with various ways to shut out some opposition parties, it has allowed others to operate — for now.

Yem Ponhearith, a longtime Sokha deputy, is now president of the Progressive Democratic Party. Rong Chhun, a prominent labor organizer who joined forces with the CNRP in 2013, is an adviser to the Nation Power Party.

Rithy, of CNRP-America, said his group supports Rong Chhun's party "in spirit," but not formally be-

cause of the legal problems it would create inside the country.

Prak said the remnants of the CNRP would be better off focusing their efforts on uniting opposition forces — both inside and outside the country. And he's not ready to close the book on Kem Sokha's political career. He said he still meets with members of CNRP-USA every few days to talk about getting the boss back in the mix.

"It's hard to say a politician is done with politics," Prak said. "I wouldn't say he's done. I mean, you know, he's done right now because he doesn't have the freedom to do so."



From drought, to floods, to El Niño in a year

By Kim Chanchav

Rain-induced floods destroyed Cambodian farmers' crops just before harvest, following a planting season plagued by drought and water shortages.

Flooding across 10 northwestern provinces of Cambodia — most of which share a border with Thailand — has been particularly severe, persisting from September through October. This has devastated the rice crops of residents who were already grappling with economic hardships, compounded by tensions along the border.

In the aftermath of the floods, the farmers now face warnings of El Niño, with authorities pushing drought-resistant rice varieties and encouraging rural residents to use water "sparingly, responsibly and with great caution."

A lost harvest

Battambang province has been hit especially hard by climate change. Farmers, who had struggled with severe drought and a lack of water for their fields, suddenly faced heavy rains and flooding just as their laboriously cultivated rice crops were ready for harvest. Preliminary reports indicate that the flooding has affected over 120,000 hectares of rice fields in

this province.

Thi Thieb, 64, a resident of Sno Village, Ou Dambang Muoy commune, Sangke district, stated that his 1 hectare of rice — for which he had invested over 1 million riel, or about $250 — is now completely submerged due to flooding.

However, he noted that even without the floods, the crop would not have yielded a good harvest; since he began sowing in late May, conditions were poor due to a lack of irrigation and a drought, which caused the rice stalks to wither and turn red. Because his fields — along with those of other villagers — are submerged and located in a deep-lying area, he was unable to reach them to see the extent of the flooding firsthand as of October 7.

Meas Saray, 50, a resident of Damnak Dangkor village, Reang Kesey commune, Sangke district, has evacuated to stay at her sister's house because her own home was flooded — a situation that persisted as of October 7, when she was interviewed by Mekong Independent. She and her husband have placed their household belongings and supplies on a raised bed, keeping them well above the floodwaters. Much like Thi Thieb, Meas Saray saw her rice crop wither and scorch due to a dry spell that struck between late Au-

gust and early September. Surprisingly, however, the drought was followed by severe flooding.

"The weather is just bizarre — I never imagined it could reach this point! It's unbelievable that right after such scorching, dry heat the rains came and caused such sudden, overwhelming flooding," she said.

"People were already preparing to harvest their rice, which had turned a reddish-brown color, but then the flood came and wiped everything out completely. Over 10 hectares of my aunt's rice crop were submerged before she could harvest any of it. The same goes for my younger sibling, whose 2.5-hectare plot near the dam in the middle of the lake was also flooded before it could be harvested."

With her entire rice crop destroyed by the flood, Meas Saray does not yet know how she will manage to cover the costs of the pesticides, fertilizers, and land-preparation services she used. For now, she sees no other option but to take on further debt to fund her next planting season.

Currently, Meas Saray's husband works as a hired laborer, carrying and bagging rice for others to earn an income to support the family, while their son has migrated to the city for work to help cope with these

difficult living conditions. Meas Saray and her daughter are discussing the possibility of the daughter finding work to help support the family, but the daughter is only 16 years old, meaning she is not yet of legal working age.

Unpredictable futures

Sao Run, a 57-year-old farmer from Damnak Dangkor village, Reang Kesei commune, Sangke district, has lost her entire 10-hectare rice crop — the family's sole hope for the future. She explained that this year's farming season was marked by constant anxiety; shortly after she sowed the seeds on May 20, the emerging crops were repeatedly hit by heat and dry weather, causing some to wither and die. Distressed by the damage to her rice crop, she invested in nutritional supplements, herbicides, and fertilizers, which helped secure some yield — but now, the rice is being submerged by water once again.

"This flood has really made me think twice about continuing. We were supposed to harvest at the end of September, but then the floodwaters came and submerged everything. Farming under these conditions is nerve-wracking — it's a constant state of anxiety. The thought of doing it all over again is

terrifying. I'm terrified of facing water shortages again; as a farmer, I'm deeply worried. It really makes me want to give up."

On October 7, Sao Run was overseeing her children as they pumped water out of the flooded rice fields, hoping to allow a harvesting machine to enter and salvage at least some of the crop. However, she noted that the cost of harvesting this submerged rice is essentially just for show; the yield is so low that it barely covers the cost of the harvesting machine. One hectare of this flooded rice produces less than a ton, and to make matters worse, the price for "wet" freshly harvested rice has dropped — fetching only about 800,000 Riel per ton, or about $200.

Difficulties along the border

Battambang is a province bordering Thailand. Beyond agriculture, some residents here work as migrant laborers in Thailand to cover family expenses, repay bank loans, and secure capital for local farming activities. However, following the emergence of border tensions in May last year — which escalated into two separate armed clashes — many Cambodian migrant workers were forced to abandon their jobs and return home.

Chin Bunret, 50, along with her husband and children, returned to Cambodia — specifically to Chhay Ballang village, Thibdei commune, Koas Krala district — this May, following the second round of border fighting. Upon their return, the family immediately turned to agriculture, engaging in pig farming and cultivating a 5-hectare rice field. Before leaving for Thailand, Chin Bunret had taken out a $15,000 bank loan to build a house, intending to repay the debt with the earnings from her work in Thailand. After returning from Thailand, she borrowed an additional 20 million riel ($5,000) from a private lender to invest in farming. Unfortunately, this year's climate fluctuations — ranging from drought to subsequent flooding — completely destroyed her rice fields. She is now burdened by multiple layers of debt.

"Take my situation, for example: I'm a farmer, and because I grew rice, I ended up in debt to both a microfinance institution and a private lender — the burden is immense. I would like to go back [to Thailand], but I can't; it's simply not possible. I'm afraid of being arrested by Thai soldiers! If I try to cross via an unofficial route, I'll get caught — there have been many reports."

Chan Kueab, the husband of Chin Bunret — who

was busy feeding pigs at the time — expressed hope in his last remaining option: pig farming.

Despite the loss of the rice harvest and the inability to return to work in Thailand, Chan Kueab feels compelled to try farming again with his wife once the floodwaters recede.

Nhanh Thau, 55, a resident of Cheung Tinh village in Thipdei commune, Koas Krala district, finds herself in a similar situation. Her husband and children, formerly migrant workers in Thailand, returned home to farm rice. However, the recent floods have caused significant hardship, leaving the family in debt due to the costs incurred from their farming activities. She expressed a desire to return to Thailand with her family for work, but noted that the current situation at the border prevents this — workers are not being accepted, and she also fears that they might be arrested by Thai soldiers.

The damage

Following the floods, authorities have been gathering data and distributing emergency food aid to those affected. In Sovannmony, deputy director of the Battambang provincial department of agriculture, told Mekong Independent that the flooding has im-

pacted over 120,000 hectares of rice fields across the province. Of this total, more than 70,000 hectares of crops have been damaged to the point where they cannot be harvested.

Local authorities and the National Committee for Disaster Management are assessing the impact; for areas where recovery is possible, authorities will provide seeds, whereas for areas where recovery is not possible, food supplies will be provided to the residents.

Soth Kimkolmony, spokesperson for the National Committee for Disaster Management, said on October 19 that the authorities had not yet determined the specific assistance required by the affected residents.

"Only after the assessment is complete will we be able to determine the specific requirements — such as the number of hectares affected, the number of families in need, and the quantity of rice seeds required — so that we can provide support in the near future."

Sok Lou, governor of Battambang province, declined to grant an interview, but stated publicly on October 6 that the government had offered aid to 15,000 families, with priority given to those most severely affected by flooding and those in genuine

need, such as widows and the elderly with no one to care for them. He urged heightened vigilance regarding venomous animals, the risk of drowning, and dengue fever, and encouraged citizens to strive to restore their livelihoods by engaging in agricultural production and other income-generating activities once the floodwaters recede.

The climate threat

The Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology has projected a 100% probability for the "El Niño" weather pattern to affect Cambodia in early 2027.

The ministry says the global weather pattern is expected to lead to water shortages here, as the region now prepares for its second rice planting of the year.

On the morning of October 19, the ministry issued an announcement urging continued cooperation in conserving water sources for the upcoming dry season. The public is encouraged to use water "sparingly, responsibly, and with great caution" — particularly in remote rural areas located far from water sources.

In Sovannmony, the deputy director of Battambang's department of agriculture, said authorities were coordinating cultivation and recovery plans.

They would assess and advise farmers on where and when to plant crops to manage water supplies in coordination with industrial and household use, he said.

"In total, approximately 98,000 hectares across Battambang province have been identified for potential replanting and recovery. This includes three to four areas situated near existing water reservoirs managed by the department of water resources."

Furthermore, the department of agriculture has provided training on irrigation and climate change adaptation covering crops such as vegetables and cassava.

In Sovannmony said traditional farming practices were no longer suitable given current climate conditions.

"Farmers cannot simply plant crops and wait for rainfall; they might lose their harvest once or twice before finally getting enough rain on the third attempt to secure a yield," he said, instead encouraging irrigation systems such as sprinklers or drip irrigation.

The department of agriculture has advised farmers to use rice varieties resilient to climate change — such as Phka Rumduol, Sen Kra-ob, Sen Pidor, Rang

Chey, Srangae Thngon, and Srangae Sral — while avoiding varieties that lack such resilience and would perish even under minor water shortages.

The next cycle

Ek Phnom district experienced four flooding events this year. The first three were the typical, recurring annual floods from the Sangke river. However, the flood in September — which caused large-scale damage to the rice crop — was triggered by water released from the Sek Sak Dam. This made it difficult for farmers to harvest their crops before they were submerged.

Sitting in front of her house watching damp rice drying in the air, 39-year-old Tuom Sophi — who lost 1.5 hectares of rice — explained that she had managed to harvest and sell some of the crop after the flood, earning 650,000 riel ($160). In contrast, the production costs for the rice farming had exceeded 3 million riel ($750). As a result of this flooding, she has fallen into debt to the suppliers of fertilizers and pesticides.

She is now worried about future cultivation, as this year has brought both floods and droughts — conditions to which farmers struggle to adapt quickly.

“Most of the time, we can only farm when the water recedes, perhaps around the end of October. If the river water doesn’t rise again during this period, people will start planting once more,” she said.

“There is some hope [that it won’t flood once more], but then there is the risk of a lack of water instead.”



Sao Run at her rice field in Battambang province, early October.





Chan Kueab feeds his pigs, above, and a flooded property in Sangke district.





Flooded rice fields in Battambang province. (Kim Chanchav)



Takeo man can't stop getting arrested for social media posts

By Mech Dara, Danielle Keeton-Olsen

Mom Vith described her husband as persistent. They met after he had seen her ride a bicycle around their village in Takeo province's Tralach commune, and he sought her out, eager to get to know her.

She appreciated his determination to get to know her, and it eventually led her to love Phon Yuth. But now that he's been arrested for a third time, she said his persistence challenges her.

"At one point, at the lowest point of the suffering, I've thought that I want to give him up," she said. But she doesn't feel that way now, she told reporters.

Phon Yuth, 42, is currently serving his third prison sentence, all for charges related to his posts on Facebook. Most recently he was arrested on October 29 last year for comments on Facebook related to the Cambodia-Thailand border conflict. But his wife said she still worries about his condition in the Takeo Provincial Prison, as he is unable to use his legs and must use a wheelchair to cover far distances. He also is experiencing severe breathing issues for which he was taken to hospital, according to Mom Vith.

"We haven't seen each other in six months because he got sick," she told reporters, saying she had

tried to visit in mid-September but was turned away.

'Why does he do this?'

The couple's life together has been marked by financial strain. Now living with several relatives on a small farm in Takeo, Mom Vith, 39, said she and her husband relocated around a dozen times in order to try to earn a living.

Mom Vith is an orphan, so she was determined to earn some income and contribute what she can, she said, even though she also has disabilities that impact her legs and hips. She said she was hesitant to accept his advances initially because Phon Yuth's parents did not want him to marry her, she said. But when he came to Thailand, following her to a job opportunity she had around 15 years ago as a restaurant dish-washer, she said she became more interested in him and began to care for him too.

They lived together for about two years in a monastery in Thailand, supplementing her restaurant salary by selling bracelets and other trinkets to tourists. But when she got pregnant, they decided to move back to Cambodia.

Mom Vith gave birth to the couple's only child 12 years ago, and shortly after they moved from living

with Phon Yuth's brother in Phnom Penh to Siem Reap. She remembered it as one of her happiest times, as the family of three all lived together. But they had to survive by selling bracelets, and sometimes simply begging on the streets.

Throughout this time, Mom Vith started noticing that her husband spent a lot of time on social media, specifically Facebook and then TikTok, posting his concerns.

Phon Yuth's brother, Phon Sopheap recalls the same. He too had asked his brother to stop posting on social media.

"I also question him, why does he do this?" he said, saying it can be risky for him too, as some police questioned him, looking for Phon Yuth. "Some people confuse me and him. I'm just his brother."

But when asked why he thought his brother spoke so persistently on social media, Phon Sopheap noticed a stark difference between the two men. Phon Sopheap is illiterate, while his brother can read.

"When we're in the city, we go to the same city but he's going in a different direction" because of his literacy, he said. "He goes through and looks into things much more [online] before he makes a speech."

Fearful presence

Mom Yuth said her husband's latest arrest was his third time in detention. She said she wished he would stop posting after he spent more than a year in prison from 2024, but he continued shortly after.

He was arrested again in Takeo province last October, after making comments online about the border conflict with Thailand. He had posted on TikTok about the villages facing unrest on the border ahead of the fighting in December, and the leaders of the country. And perhaps like a premonition or a promise, he said he would "dare to go to prison" for his beliefs.

In late April, he was sentenced to 18 months in prison under incitement to commit a felony.

She says she works to save money to visit him and bring food to the Takeo Provincial Prison, but it is a lot of work for her to handle.

"My husband does not dare to tell me any information because the police sit next to him," she said.

Am Sam Ath, operations director for the human rights NGO Licadho, told Mekong Independent that the multiple arrests show that in spite of his poor financial situation, authorities seem afraid of his social media presence.

"It shows that authorities are too frightened and scared of Phon Yuth who had been repeatedly arrested … it is related to the same issue. This is a very tight restriction of freedom of expressing opinion against a disabled person who is unable to walk."

Am Sam Ath said he believed Phon Yuth spoke so frequently "because of his deep caring about society and having seen the inaction in society, so it pushed him not to be scared."



Mom Vith at her house in Takeo province in October. (Danielle Keeton-Olsen)





‘One job is not enough’: Phuket workers on a changing industry

By Anis Chity

The only thing about money in Phuket that bothered me was the ATM. Every withdrawal cost me a 250 baht fee, or about $7.50. My currency is strong, and most things on the island feel cheap to me, so that fee had become my one real complaint. I said as much to Kittisak Boonmee, a tour guide who goes by Kit, just after he'd finished telling me how hard the island has become to afford.

He laughed.

"For you, 250 baht is a fee," he said. "For many people here, that's more than half a day of work."

He's right. Phuket's legal minimum wage has been 400 baht a day, or about $12, since January 2025, and it is still 400 this year. My withdrawal fee is worth more than half a shift at the legal floor, and I haven't bought anything yet.

My wife and I are spending several weeks on the island. I wanted to find out how much of the money visitors like us spend here reaches the people who serve us. Kit's laugh was the first answer.

Our visit came as questions are being asked about tourism: a national debate around foreign visitors' respect for local society as the government floats fees and restrictions. The industry is meanwhile seeing an

unsteady mix of stagnant arrival numbers, persistent labor shortages and rising living costs.

Two jobs, one island

Kit is 34, born and raised in Phuket, in a family that has been here a long time. In the mornings he guides tours. In the afternoons he works as crew on the island hopping boats.

"One job is not enough anymore," he told me.

I asked whether that held even for someone born here. "Yes," he said. "Phuket is one of the most expensive places in Thailand now. Everything goes up so much. Not only me. Everybody I know is struggling."

I'd caught a small version of this from the visitor's side. When we arrived from Bangkok on the overnight bus, food and transport felt more expensive here than in the capital, at least in the places we used. For us, that was a line in a travel budget. For Kit, it's the price of staying where he grew up.

I'd also done some bargaining of my own in those first days. On a very windy day, with nobody else on the beach, I talked an umbrella and two beach beds down from 400 baht to 100, or about $3, for the two of us, using the wind and the empty sand as my argu-

ment. Measured Kit's way, the 300 baht I saved was three quarters of a day's minimum wage.

I asked him about something ordinary: phones. "iPhone here is like driving a Mercedes-Benz," he said. Most people can't pay cash, so they buy in installments over many months. Drop to a midrange Samsung or a Huawei and the price falls a long way; an Oppo is cheaper again. An intern, by his reckoning, can buy an Oppo outright with one month's salary.

Then we got onto cafés. Tourists from London had told him that some popular cafés in Bangkok charge close to London prices, though Thailand's minimum wage, as he put it, is "maybe 10 times lower." He'd seen those prices himself. When his family visited his sister in Bangkok, they went to an upscale café, and coffee with some dessert came to between 1,500 and 2,000 baht, around $45-$60.

"That's three, four days of minimum wage for a Thai worker," he said. "For one afternoon."

At 400 baht a day it's nearer four or five. One café says little about a whole city, let alone an island. It does show the gap Kit was describing.

Same industry, very different pay

The best breakfast my wife and I have found on the island came from a café near Karon Beach. A big English breakfast, a croissant with salad, eggs and chicken, mango sticky rice, a watermelon juice and a mango juice: 900 baht for the two of us, roughly US$27, and the quality was extraordinary.

Rif works the front desk at a four star hotel on the island. He told me he earns 10,000 baht a month, about $300. Our breakfast came to nearly a tenth of that.

When I followed up with him on WhatsApp, he filled in the hours behind the number. His shifts run nine to 10 hours. In high season he gets four days off a month; in the quieter months, about one a week.

Then there is his girlfriend. She works at a large hotel and, according to Rif, receives 15,000 to 35,000 baht a month in service charges alone, about $450-$1,050 on top of her regular salary. At the low end, that is one and a half times his monthly pay. At the high end, three and a half.

The money comes with its own conditions, as Rif described them. She works five days a week, nine hours a day including a break, with two days off that rotate. Getting time off around Songkran, New Year or a busy high season weekend is close to impossible.

If she works a public holiday, she is usually credited with a day off to bank and take later, in the low season.

Put side by side, on Rif's account, he works about six days a week for his 10,000 baht. She works five, and her service charge alone can come to more than three times his pay.

Many hotels and restaurants in Thailand add a 10% service charge to the bill, and how much of it reaches staff depends on the employer. When BK Magazine asked around Bangkok restaurants in 2015, the answers ran from nothing at one dessert café chain to the full 10% at a couple of independent places. Most of the waiters and owners it spoke to put the staff share at about four of the 10 points. That was restaurants in another city a decade ago, not Phuket's hotels today. It still shows how wide the spread can be.

The workers Phuket still needs

Rif's experience is particularly striking given Phuket's continuing demand for workers. A 2024 study by Srinakharinwirot University identified two problems facing the island's hotels: finding enough employees and recruiting people with the skills em-

ployers needed.

The demand was still visible in August 2026, when a Phuket hotel job fair advertised more than 2,500 positions ahead of high season. Yet visitor numbers are not rising in lockstep with the industry. According to Tourism Authority of Thailand figures reported on October 21, Phuket generated almost 400 billion baht in tourism revenue in the first nine months of 2026, even as arrivals fell slightly from a year earlier.

Research also complicates the idea that tourism work is uniformly exploitative. A 2021 study based on interviews with 150 tourism workers in Bangkok and northern Thailand found generally high job satisfaction, with higher levels reported among employees of foreign-owned businesses.

But a June 2026 study of migrant hotel workers in Phuket identified a different set of pressures. Workers from Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia described long hours, limited opportunities to move up and difficulties navigating employment regulations. The research also identified lower labor costs as one reason hotels recruited migrant workers.

Some tourism leaders see the divides, too. At the Phuket Tourism Forum in September, Rangsiman

Kingkaew, president of the Phuket Tourism Industry Council and vice president of the Phuket Tourist Association, described the industry's post-pandemic recovery as "K-shaped." Well-funded four- and five-star hotels had recovered strongly, he said, while smaller two- and three-star operators faced greater difficulties. He also pointed to rising land and rental costs that were pushing some long-time residents out of parts of Phuket Old Town, as reported by The Phuket News.

Rangsiman was talking about businesses and housing, not individual pay. His remarks do not explain Rif's salary, or tell me why his girlfriend receives so much more in service charges. Nor do the studies show how representative their experiences are. But the stories and the wider reporting point to a similar contradiction: Tourism can create work and considerable wealth without spreading its rewards evenly.

Good and bad at the same time

Nurding drives for Bolt, the ride hailing app. His English is limited, so our first conversation went through a translation app. He was very friendly, and he told me he likes Phuket.

Most of his passengers are tourists, and many of his friends work in hotels and restaurants. When I asked about his relationship with tourists, he laughed. Good and bad, the translation said, at the same time.

The good part is simple: tourists are his customers. The bad part came out as a list. Drunk tourists who fight. Tourists who cause accidents. Homeless foreigners he'd seen on the TV news, who came to Thailand thinking it would be cheap. In his view, the country attracts a lot of what his app rendered as "low value" tourists, people who want to live here for free and then get a surprise.

The money came up later, when we picked the conversation back up on WhatsApp. Nurding doesn't own the car he drives. It belongs to a company and is registered as a public transport vehicle. As he described the deal, he gets 18,000 baht a month ($540) plus 40% of his fares, counted after fuel and the app's fee come off.

He also passed on the figures drivers tend to quote. Full time drivers, he said, can take 3,000 to 5,000 baht a day in high season ($90-$150), roughly November to April. In the rainy months, May to October, that drops to around 1,500 to 2,500 ($45-$75), with longer waits between bookings and more re-

liance on long runs to and from the airport. Those are takings for drivers in general, before costs. They are not Nurding's pay.

The takings look incredible, he said, until you count what comes out of them: fuel, which he says costs more on the island than on the mainland; tires worn down on Phuket's steep hill roads; and the commission Bolt deducts from fares.

He told me to watch out for the checkpoints, too. Drivers who carry passengers in cars that aren't registered for public transport, he said, risk a fine of about 2,000 baht ($60) on the spot if they're caught in sweeps around the airport or the hotels. His car is registered, so this was a warning about the trade rather than a story about himself. The figure fits the maximum fine the government announced in February for anyone still carrying passengers in a private car, and the Transport Ministry promised tougher enforcement from October 1.

Back in our first conversation, he'd told me he was glad Thailand had tightened its visa rules. He hopes they will bring better quality tourists.

The rules had changed on September 15. A 60-day visa exemption previously covering 93 countries and territories was replaced by new arrangements, includ-

ing a 30-day tourist exemption for 60 countries and territories. The government cited security, tourism and economic interests, and diplomatic reciprocity in explaining the shift.

Another debate concerns a proposed 450-baht fee for foreign tourists. The government says the money would help pay for visitor insurance and tourism development. The Thai Hotels Association has questioned the health care figures used to justify the insurance component, while tourism businesses have also sought greater transparency over how the revenue would be spent. As of October, the charge was still a proposal, not a fee being collected.

Neither that proposal nor the new visa arrangements is known to prevent the kind of disruptive behaviour Nurding described. And he did not identify which rule change he had in mind.

The phrase “quality tourists” has a meaning beyond the driver’s seat. At the same September forum, Rangsiman argued that visitors should be judged not only by how much they spend, but also by how long they stay and whether they respect local society and the environment. Nurding had no such formula. His concern was the trouble some visitors cause. Still, he and the industry leader put respect at the center of

what makes tourism worth having.

But the debate raises a wider question for an island whose economy depends so heavily on visitors: How should tourism be managed, and who should benefit from the money it brings?

He was clear that he's happy with tourists. Come here to have fun and show respect, he said, and that's good. Make trouble, and you're not welcome.

He needs the tourists. He also has terms.

Same country, same city

Three conversations are not a survey. Kit, Rif and Nurding can't speak for everyone who works in Phuket's tourist trade, and they didn't speak with one voice to me either.

Kit has two jobs and says one isn't enough anymore. Rif's pay and his girlfriend's come out of the same industry and land a long way apart. Nurding depends on visitors, says he's happy with them, and keeps a list of the ones he could do without.

Near the end of our conversation, Kit put it more plainly than I can. "Thailand has incredible range between poor and rich," he said. "Same country, same city. Some people pay 2,000 baht for coffee, some people work two jobs just to survive."


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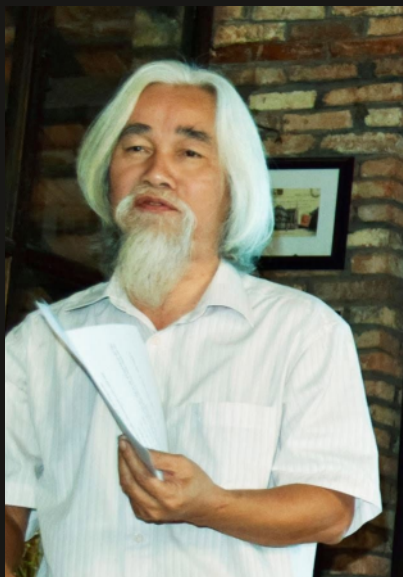























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