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### Pung Chhiv Kek [Cambodia, Activist]

Pung Chhiv Kek

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Interviewee: **PUNG CHHIV KEK**  
Interviewer: Kirpal Singh  
Date: 26 May 2015  
Location: Phnom Penh

0:00:21

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Thank you so much for coming for this interview. We are very privileged and highly honoured, and it's great to be here, especially in your own country. We understand that your mother became a minister, and your father was quite high up in the constitutional council. So you grew up in a political family, like from young?

0:00:41

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

Yes, my parents were first involved in education and my mother was a director of one primary school. My father, twice, he was secretary of state in the Ministry of Education, so still education. In 1958, Prince Sihanouk at that time was head of the state, he allowed, finally, women to be candidates. Immediately, my father pushed my mother to be the candidate and she refused. She said, "No, I'm happy, I don't want to become a Member of Parliament." But my father pushed her so much, encouraged her, asked her older sister to push her, her younger brother, pushed us, both of us. Yes. When my mother asked us if we want to see her as a candidate, we didn't understand much about politics. My sister was only eleven years old, I was sixteen, and we said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we want you to become" because we heard our father. Yes, finally, she became a candidate, the only one.

0:01:56

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Did she have any opponents during the election?

0:01:58

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

Yes... six, seven candidates. All male. My mother had a constituency not far from here. Kandal, about twenty kilometres from the capital, from Phnom Penh. I used to go with her to see how she made her campaign, political campaign speech, yes. I looked at her very interested and seven other candidates all male, very rich. My parents were not rich, so I remember she said, "I don't have money to give you. I only have ideas and promise, and I try to do all my best to keep my promise to you." But others invited the chief of the village for dinner, for lunch, gave a lot of gifts... etcetera. But my mother didn't do that. But as there were more women in the whole Cambodia, at that time already fifty-two percent of adults that could vote were

women. So my mother, and in Kandal, there were a few factories, and my mother knew pretty well that the workers were, most of the workers were women. So she addressed herself to the women and she said, "I know that your salary... you did the same work as men, but you didn't have the same salary. So, I promise you, that if you vote for me, I will do all my best to get the same salary [for you]." Then another thing that she promised also was maternity leave. "Most of you have children, and if the owner of the factory cut your salary, it's not at all good. So, I promise that if I'm elected, you will have the full salary during the three months of maternity leave." For these two reasons, she was elected, and she was appointed as Minister of Social Action. She put her promise into consideration, into force.

0:04:09

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What made you want to be a doctor? Because you became the first woman to become a fully qualified medical doctor in Cambodia.

0:04:17

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

That was when I was in Prey Veng. I was seven years old. We just finished the Second World War... this was '45. In Prey Veng, in the hospital, we didn't have a doctor, only nurses. My father was absent for about a month. During his absence, I was sick. I had malaria. I was so sick, could not eat. The nurse, there was one nurse, he didn't make the diagnosis. He only gave me a lot of antibiotics. It didn't work. So, I lost a lot of weight, of course, lost all the hair. I was very skinny and waiting to die. And [being] seven years old is very hard for a girl like that. Then I prayed. I made a promise, I said, "If Theravada helped me to recover, I will study medicine and spend all my life to help others, especially children... poor children, poor women, etcetera... who have no possibility to get good medical care." This is the promise that I did to myself. When my father came back, when he saw me, he was so sad. He said, "Oh my God, she's going to die." He said it looked like the three phases of malaria. Maybe he looked at the book, or he heard people told him like that. He said, "Okay, I have nothing to lose." He didn't trust at all, the nurse who gave me a lot of antibiotics, penicillin. It didn't work. So, he went to the market and bought quinine.

0:06:14

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Quinine, yes.

0:06:14

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

Yes, quinine. He said, "Okay, I'm going to give you [quinine]." I remember, still remember that he was shaking like that, because he didn't know how to do it. He'd

look at the book where to inject, here, not to touch the nerves, etcetera, and he made the first injection to me. Oh, I felt so, so well, after the first injection. The second one, I remember that I asked my mother to give me some food. Third, he did only ten, normally it's not so... you had to do more. But with ten...

0:06:51

[Kirpal Singh](#)

You recovered.

0:06:52

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

Yes, and started eating, etcetera. From that day I told my father, "You saved my life the second time. You gave me the life, and now you gave me a second time, and I will become a medical doctor." From seven years old and every year I said, "Okay I'm going to study very hard and become a medical doctor."

0:07:13

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Because your parents were both pretty high up in society in the sense, right? Do you remember getting to know Prince Sihanouk himself, or his family quite well? There must have been occasions when you must have met the Prince, right?

0:07:28

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

Yes. My mother... Yes, she was very familiar with the palace. In '58, '59, when she was a Member of Parliament, Queen Kossamak would like to find a good professor, a very serious one that can take care of all her grandchildren. They went to school, to the public school, but when they came home, they had to make their homework, study the lesson, etcetera, etcetera. So, she found my mother. My mother went to the palace every day, to pick up the Prince, Princesses, including the King, King Sihanouk. When I met King Sihanouk the first time, he was only five years old, so I held him. He was very cute, very cute, with his young brother. She brought them to school. My mother brought them to our house, and then she put them in one small table, one by one, and forced them to make their homework. So, she was very familiar to the palace and as she was the Minister of Social Action and later on, Minister a second time of Health. So, she knew... she met Prince Sihanouk several times, my father also. Because at the end, my father was also one-time Minister of Information, and for three years before Prince Sihanouk was deposed, before '70, he was appointed as the high... Secretary-General of the High Council of Throne. So, his office was inside the palace. Both of them were very familiar with the palace, with Prince Sihanouk. For me, I met him some time, but I didn't work with him.

0:09:47

When I... in 1971, when I left Cambodia, because also, my father was very sick. My father had an ulcer of the stomach before I was born. When we know that when you have a big stress, it can be very bad, and he had haemorrhage. That can be dangerous for his life. So, when the coup arrived, and then Prince Sihanouk was deposed, and we had civil war, my father was very worried, and then he started having problems again and I said, "Okay we have to bring you to Paris again. You cannot stay in that environment." So, I decided to go, and Lon Non, decided that he didn't want the official, the Cambodian official to join Prince Sihanouk in Beijing. When Lon Non sent an official letter to all the Cambodian embassies in the world, including in France, saying that the civil servant, high ranking civil servant, should come back to Cambodia immediately. If you don't do that, you are considered as a traitor of the nation, yes. My father sent a medical certificate to Phnom Penh saying that, "Here, I'm sick, so I need a few more months to treat myself." He didn't acknowledge that and we were declared traitors. We, I said, my younger sister, my parents, my younger sister, and myself, four of us, family of Pung, I didn't do anything. My younger sister, she was still a student. We didn't do anything concerning politics, etcetera. My parents, even them, they went to France only with a small bag like that. So, we were considered as traitors of the nation and if we came back, we will be executed. We could not come back. After one year in 1972, my father said, "Okay, if they consider me as a traitor, I will join Prince Sihanouk." He moved to Beijing, and I stayed in Paris, continued to study medicine, and worked in Paris, and in '73 I followed my future husband in Vancouver. So, this is... and at the beginning, I didn't want to do anything concerning the peace, etcetera. But when they considered me as a traitor, it hurt me a lot.

0:12:46

In '75, the Khmer Rouge occupied Cambodia and then tried to... kill almost all. Then I didn't have any news from my relatives. So, from that time, I started becoming involved in politics. I remember I was in Vancouver, there was a Council General of China. I always met him, and asked him questions about what's going on in Cambodia. Did he hear something? I don't know why I wanted to go and visit my parents in Beijing. Beginning of '75... January. I didn't know that Phnom Penh will surrender in April. The day that I took the airplane from Seattle, it was 17th of April. It was a coincidence. I didn't know that in January, that on the 17th Phnom Penh will surrender to Khmer Rouge. When my late husband accompanied me to Seattle to take the airplane, we saw a big title in the newspapers: "Phnom Penh Surrendered." I was scared. I said, "If I arrived in Beijing only at the end of April, my trip, maybe my parents and Prince Sihanouk went to Cambodia already." For me, if Phnom Penh surrendered, Prince Sihanouk will go back. So, when I arrived in Hong Kong, I called my parents in Beijing and he said to me, "Don't worry, keep your itinerary, and don't change anything. It was not immediate." When I went to Beijing, when I arrived, about thirty Cambodians coming from France waited with Prince Sihanouk to go back to Cambodia. In my mind I said, "If he goes back immediately, I will go also, for one month." Can you imagine the rest? Yes? So fortunately for my parents, for my children, and for me, and for a lot of Cambodians that stayed with Prince Sihanouk

at that time, nobody came to invite Prince Sihanouk to go to Cambodia.

0:15:23

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Let me short circuit now and come to the most critical role that you played in bringing the two parties together, because you brokered the peace, right? That meeting. At that point, Hun Sen already become like the boss, when you were brokering the peace? Because many attempts were made to bring the King and Hun Sen together at some point, but all were failures, right?

0:15:48

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

Yes, when I was in Vancouver, I met a man - Mitterrand. He was at that time head of a socialist party. My late husband knew him very well, but not me. I had the pleasure to meet Madam Mitterrand and the wife of some socialist leaders. We had a good contact, and I took this opportunity to ask Mitterrand for help for Cambodia. It was '77, '78, something like that. I said, "Look at... it's very bad in Cambodia. We have no news. We don't know what the Khmer Rouge did too. I lost a lot of my relatives." Mitterrand promised me, saying that '81, 1981 there will be a new election for the President of the Republic of France. He said, if he, Mitterrand, has a chance to be elected, he promised me in front of his wife, all of his colleagues, that he will do anything to get peace for Cambodia. I said, "And if Khmer Rouge continues to control the country, what are you doing?" He said, "If the Khmer Rouge allows me, I will visit them in Cambodia." Wow. Because we know that Khmer Rouge will not do something to the President of French Republic. No. "Oh, thank you very much," etcetera, and I continued to pray for him since that time. In '81 he was elected. He appointed my husband as the Ambassador to Angola. When we arrived in Angola in 1992, we know that Angola and Cambodia at that time had the same political regime. I know that one day someone from Phnom Penh will go and visit them, and it happened. '82, a few months after our arrival, led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time, with some colleagues that are still here. It's Mr... Prime Minister Hun... at that time, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hun Sen, with two or three others, went to visit Angola in an official visit. As I had very good relations with the Angolese Foreign Minister, Minister Paulo George, who used to speak fluent French because my Portuguese was not so good at that time. He invited me to meet Hun Sen, and I invited him to the residence without asking permission from my late husband. I decided when I met him, and I said, "Do you want peace for Cambodia? Because... why are you fighting against each other?" He said, "Yes, we want peace." I said, "Okay, we try to put you with Prince Sihanouk, because my parents are very close with Prince Sihanouk. So... why don't we do that and then you can get peace for Cambodia?" He said, "I'm not against that idea." So, I invited him with all the delegation to our residence and after, when he left Angola, I left Angola in '86, and went back to Paris.

0:19:34

My father said, "Prince Sihanouk will come to Paris in September '87, so you should go to see him at the airport and ask him for a meeting." I met him, he was surprised to see me. When I explained, he said, "Okay, 24th." Two days after, he invited us to meet him in Faire entre Du Noir [Transliteration], 120 kilometres from Paris. We met him for six hours, and he decided to see Hun Sen. It was not easy, because French didn't recognize (the regime) yet, but thanks to Mitterrand, we had some privilege. Normally, the French should not invite the delegation from Phnom Penh because they didn't recognise the regime yet, but Prince Sihanouk helped us to get the visa and the first meeting happened on the 2nd December 1987. The organiser was only four of us - my parents, my late husband, and myself. No one helped us. For the Cambodian delegation, we could not even get the car for them, we could not get the hotel for them. So, I had to go and borrow two cars from the Ambassador of Soviet Union in Paris at that time, because Prince Sihanouk asked me not to have any contact with the Vietnamese... the Vietnamese Embassy in Paris, no. But Soviet Union...

0:21:15

[Kirpal Singh](#)

How was the first meeting? How was that meeting?

0:21:17

[Pung Chhiv Kek:](#)

Very good. I didn't go because my father, who was a very wise person, told me to be careful. Because many people tried to arrange the meeting. Cambodian delegation arrived in Paris, and Prince Sihanouk sent a telegram saying - "I cannot go". Why? Mysterious, we don't know. My father said, "Don't talk to the press, nothing." You do that behind the curtain. Didn't talk to any person, we don't know who wanted, who didn't want this meeting. So, I followed the advice of my father, and we succeeded. When the meeting happened, I didn't want to go because I felt a little bit embarrassed. Because many of my friends who were journalists came to our apartment and said, "What's going on? What's going on? You did something?" I said, "No, no, no, nothing!" I was embarrassed to lie to my best friend. I didn't go, and it was good, yes.

0:22:30

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What made you come back to Cambodia?

0:22:32

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

When I saw the draft of the peace agreement, I saw that Khmer Rouge were also part

of the peace agreement, signed also, etcetera... My heart was broken. When I organised these two meetings, I didn't want to involve Khmer Rouge. For me, Khmer Rouge, I didn't recognise them. They were criminals, they should be trialed, like after the Second World War, yes. So, when I saw that I said, "What can we do? Nothing." So with some of my friends, my parents, my late husband, and my daughter and a friend of ours we said, "We are going to set up an association, maybe a league of human rights, to monitor the work of the Khmer Rouge, in Paris first." What they are doing and when they come to Cambodia, we have to come with them because maybe they would like to bring back this bad regime to Cambodia. So, we had to be very, very alert. We set up LICADHO (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights) in Paris first with the law, 1901. Very easy. Three persons can set up... and we setup and we monitor so when Ieng Sary went to Paris, he went to visit his children in London, we used to alert all of our friends, follow what he... Really, we care... and when they came to Cambodia Kieu Samphan, etcetera, we came to Cambodia also. At that time UN (United Nations) came to Cambodia – UNTAC, that we call United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, we said, "Okay, we'll continue to do our work to monitor what they are going to do. Are they going to kill Cambodian people again?" So, this is the main reason for LICADHO at the beginning. We decided, "Okay we'll work with UN, and UN can maybe help us on how to monitor the election, because it's all new for us."

0:25:00

As a medical doctor, I went with a medical doctor from Medecins du Monde to give medical care to this prison. From that time, '92 until now we continue this programme. So, by doing at the beginning just a group to monitor the work of Khmer Rouge, and then as a medical doctor, and then we provide medical care to prisoners and then later on, to also people outside like women, victims of domestic violence, of rape, of trafficking, etcetera. It's become now more and more our job; a daily job and I could not withdraw myself. It's like a spiral. Yes. When I go, I cannot get out now. I cannot, even if I want to say, "Okay now is the time to be, maybe, far away from this." No, it's not possible because it goes on and on and on and on...

0:26:04

[Kirpal Singh](#)

You have mentioned your father in this interview many times. But you also mentioned many times that one of the things that your father seemed to have had was wisdom. He was very wise, you said many times. Do you think wisdom is a very essential quality of a leader, a good leader?

0:26:23

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

My opinion yes, I think so. I think that is very important for a good leader. If you don't have that...





0:26:33

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Would you say that one of the major challenges, if you use that word, for Cambodian leadership has been they have had the normal resources and strength, and army... power and all that... but probably they didn't have wisdom, because if they have wisdom the history of Cambodia would be very different?

0:26:56

[Pung Chhiv Kek:](#)

That is missing, yes, because you have power... is good. But your power comes from where? From the people. You have to get the trust of the people. You have to see that people trust you, people respect you. They respect. You don't need to force people. If people respect you, because they are scared of you, it's not good. They respect you because they love you, because they trust you. They know that they can count on you. It's very important.

0:27:28

[Kirpal Singh](#)

I want to bring this interview to a gentle close by asking you two personal questions. One is, you're a leader yourself, whether you like it or not.

0:27:38

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

I don't consider myself as a leader. I consider myself as a mother of some... In LICADHO, I don't want my colleagues to call me Madam or President. Here, our culture, our habits, we are like a family. So if they are a little bit younger than me, they'll call me big sister... or aunt. So, we like that... I feel close to them.

0:28:13

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Sure, and in that sense you're the leader of a very huge family, right? A very, very big family.

0:28:19

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

They trust me.

0:28:20

[Kirpal Singh](#)

They trust you, and that's a very critical point.

0:28:23

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

Yes. This is my reward. They trust me, they respect me when they talk to me. I don't need to say, "Respect me", or "Trust me". No, no, no. When they have problems, they come to me, and then I encourage them, and I am honest with them. If I don't know I said, "You know, it's not because I went to France to study that I know everything. This is... I don't know, so let's find out together."

0:28:48

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right. So, my final question is... and I think this is now public knowledge, that the Prime Minister has invited you, maybe once or twice, to sit on some council or some... Can you share with that because I hear that you declined?

0:29:02

[Pung Chhiv Kek](#)

Yes. First of all, in 1997 he would like to set up a Human Rights Committee, and I didn't want to join, because for me, I didn't want to join a Human Rights Committee without having first to draft a law. I want to join only a committee that has a lot of participation of people. We would like to have a National Human Rights Commission, and we would like to have this commission independent, conform to an international standard called 'Paris Principle', with participation of many, many people before. This is serious because it's independent; it can provide... If I want to join some institution, it's not for myself. I don't want to be, in the first front. No, no, no. I would like to do something for Cambodia people. To be useful for Cambodia people, you should have an institution independent that really serves the interest of the people, and having the trust of many, many people. This is the definition of democracy. That is one, so it's in 1997. Recently, he invited me, but I put my conditions. I said I can accept if this institution can be really independent, if we can work in that institution seen as independent with a legal framework, with a good law. Three conditions - this institution can control the human resource, can control the financial resource, and can have immunity... and I see that none of the conditions was met.

0:31:12

[Kirpal Singh](#)

It has been a great pleasure talking to you, Nobel Prize nominee for... twice, right?  
You are nominated, so hopefully one day... you'll soon get it.