Cambodia’s explanation for killing of activist draws doubt

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Kem Ley, a poor rice farmer’s son turned champion of Cambodia’s have-nots, was sipping his usual iced latte in the same chair he had occupied most mornings for years. Eyewitnesses say a former soldier walked into the Caltex gas station cafe, fired a semi-automatic Glock pistol into his chest and head and casually walked away.

Two weeks later, tens of thousands of mourners thronged Phnom Penh’s streets to trail the glass casket bearing Kem Ley’s body in the largest public rally Cambodia has witnessed in recent times. The funeral march reflected not only grief for the popular government critic, but also anger at a government that this year has decimated opponents through imprisonment, intimidation and, many believe, the still-unresolved killing of Kem Ley.

Many view the Southeast Asian country’s harshest crackdown in years as an attempt by Prime Minister Hun Sen to sustain his more than 30-year-long grip on power in 2018 elections. The opposition came unexpectedly close to winning the last election, in 2013.

Cambodian authorities deny any involvement in Kem Ley’s death in Phnom Penh, the capital. They arrested ex-soldier and migrant worker Oeut Ang from a distant province on allegations that he killed Kem Ley in July because the activist failed to repay a $3,000 loan. Hun Sen has promised a “vigorous investigation.”

Phnom Penh Municipal Court spokesman Ly Sophana told reporters the investigation is still underway. He did not say when it will be completed or the trial set.

“At the moment, the court is making an investigation into the case and the government can’t comment while it is in the hands of the court,” Information Minister Khieu Kanharith said.

Interviews with Oeut Ang’s wife, Kem Lay’s family and others raise doubts about the government’s assertions that a loan was the motive, heightening suspicions that the killing may have been politically motivated.

Hoeum Huot said she and her husband “lived from hand to mouth” and that he could never have had $3,000 in his pocket to lend. She said her husband, whose nickname Chuob Samlap means “meet and kill,” was prone to drunkenness, out of a job and sold his motorbike before the killing to pay off a gambling debt. She never heard him mention Kem Ley.

Kem Ley’s mother, Pov Se, and sister Kem Thavy said the 45-year-old doctor-turned-activist lived simply and never incurred debts, and had never met Oeut Ang as far as they knew.

Shortly before his death, Kem Ley spoke on radio about a report issued by the London-based research and advocacy group Global Witness that alleged the prime minister and his family had accumulated massive wealth and retained power through corruption and brute force. Earlier he had crisscrossed the country to query villagers about their problems.

Since Kem Ley’s death, his wife and five sons left in fear for Thailand, where they have applied for asylum in Australia.

“I have no idea why my brother was killed, but friends and neighbors often told me that he should not talk about Hun Sen and his family,” Kem Thavy said. “I argued with him: ‘You cannot hold up the earth all by yourself.’”

Keo Remy, president of the government’s Cambodian Human Rights Committee, refused to be interviewed or answer written questions about Kem Ley and human rights.

Activists say the killing has come to symbolize the manifold ills of Cambodian society under Hun Sen’s 31-year rule.

“The death of Kem Ley is the death of human rights in Cambodia. It is the silencing of civil society actors. They are now mute,” said But Buntenh, a prominent Buddhist monk and friend of Kem Ley’s who is among the few public figures still openly criticizing the regime. But he said the incident has also backfired on Hun Sen and his Cambodia People’s Party, having sparked a strong, albeit incohesive, pro-democracy surge among large segments of the population.

Meanwhile, Kem Ley has been elevated to a legendary status, perhaps greater than his actual accomplishments.

“With his death we have gained a great deal,” said But Buntenh. “It has been five months but people are still weeping.”

Mourners come to his simple grave every day, including more than 100 who paid their respects on the November day his family was interviewed in Kem Ley’s native village of Ang Takok, southwest of Phnom Penh.

“He was crucial to us because of the issues that he tackled. He was a great model for Cambodian people,” said mourner Chan Sy.

Kem Thavy, often wiping away tears, described her brother as gentle but independent and unwilling to compromise his ideals.

“He told me that if someone offered him 1 or 2 million dollars he would not sell out, that if someone offered him a job with a big salary in order to stop talking about Cambodia he would not take it,” she said.

Kem Ley dropped his medical practice to improve life for Cambodians, But Buntenh said. “As a doctor he could only cure one patient at a time, so he became a national doctor to treat Cambodia’s many ‘diseases’ and help thousands,” he said.

While denying any role in Kem Ley’s death, the government has taken steps to silence other critics. According to cases that the human rights group LICADHO has tracked, 26 political prisoners, including politicians and environmental and land rights activists, are behind bars. Others face criminal defamation and charges related to their personal lives.

Hun Sen lodged a defamation suit in August against his chief political rival, the self-exiled Sam Rainsy, for saying “state terrorism” was to blame for the deaths of Kem Ley and other critics, including a prominent labor leader and several environmental activists. Hun Sen said the government had nothing to gain by killing Kem Ley: “Who gains to benefit from such a case which happened at the same time the government is talking about peace and safety for the people?”

The regime has even lashed out against the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Cambodia, describing it last month as “not legitimate” and threatening to shut down its operations unless it agrees not to interfere in the country’s internal affairs.

Ou Virak, who heads the Phnom Penh think tank Future Forum, said the regime’s actions are a prelude to the 2018 elections.

The close 2013 election was “a huge wake-up call for Hun Sen and a huge blow to his ego,” he said. “His party knows that time is not on their side.”

Kem Ley apparently knew he had become a target. Three days before he was killed, he told But Buntenh that trusted sources informed him he would be killed in Phnom Penh.

The day before he died, Kem Ley posted on his Facebook page a political fable he titled “The Garden of Savage Animals,” about tigers, cobras and other ferocious beasts trying to prevent meeker animals from entering their bountiful acreage.

Their answer: intimidation. “You kill one in order to scare a thousand.”