

The Phnom Penh Post

Tue Apr 17 2018 15:32:16 GMT-0500 (Central Daylight Time)

HOME NATIONAL ▼ BUSINESS LIFESTYLE ▼ SPORT OPINION POST PROPERTY INTERNATIONAL MULTIMEDIA

JOBS Twenty years after deadly grenade attack, threat of political violence remains

Erin Handley and Ananth Baliga | Publication date 30 March 2017 | 06:33 ICT

Share f t



Bereaved relatives of Chaet Doung Daravudh, a KNP member who was killed in the March 30 grenade attack, gather around his widow, Vout Varun (centre), as they make their way to a temple for the funeral on April 2, 1997. David Van Der Veen/AFP

Twenty years ago today, some 200 members of the Khmer National Party led by long-time opposition figure Sam Rainsy gathered at a rally in Wat Botum Park to call for an independent judiciary.

Rainsy, who later recalled he hadn't been feeling well that day, said this week that he remembered little of his speech, which he delivered off the cuff. What he, and the rest of the people assembled, remembered from that day were the four deafening blasts that ripped through the crowd just as he finished speaking.

The explosions were from four grenades lobbed by still-unknown assailants, which killed at least 16, wounded more than 100 and knocked nearly everyone present to the ground.

Rainsy narrowly escaped the blast after his bodyguard, Han Many, jumped on him, shielding him from the explosion and flying shrapnel. Many later died from his injuries.

RELATED ARTICLES



Candlelight Party to hold grenade attack memorial service



Cop arrested over grenade attack



Twenty years since grenade attack on opposition rally marked

Sam Rainsy calls on opposition to never forget the events of 1997



Eight charged over grenade, 2015 shooting



More details emerge in Phnom Penh grenade attack

Multiple suspects arrested over grenade attack, but police offer few details



“What can I say? I feel like I owe my life to him,” Rainsy, who recently resigned as the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party’s president, said in an interview this week.

Two decades since that day, victims’ families have given up hope of finding the culprits, and as with most incidents of political violence in the 1990s, a local investigation got nowhere, and the perpetrators are still at large. An investigation at the time by the US Federal Bureau of investigation hinted at the involvement of the Prime Minister’s Bodyguard Unit, but was allegedly abandoned under political pressure.

Meanwhile, the crowd’s calls 20 years ago for an independent judiciary remain as relevant as ever – especially so as the Kingdom reels from last year’s murder of political analyst Kem Ley. Many considered that killing politically motivated, and the sentencing this month of his killer, former soldier Oeuth Ang, to life in prison did little to dispel many Cambodians’ lingering doubts over whether he – like the men who attacked the KNP rally – acted alone.



Sam Rainsy, president of the Khmer Nation Party at the time, is carried away after the grenade attack in 1997. David Van Der Veen/AFP

The two cases, observers said this week, are object lessons in how much, and how little, Cambodia’s political climate has changed.

Saing Soenthrith, a reporter for the *Cambodia Daily* at the time, was on his way to Wat Botum on the day of the rally, and had quickly popped into his office nearby to catch a glimpse of the day’s newspaper, when he heard a “boom, boom, boom, boom”

Rushing out of the office, Soenthrith headed to the park near the old National Assembly, where all he remembers is carnage – the green grass turning red and blood seeping through the cracks in the concrete.

“I saw many people dead and injured. I was very shocked when I saw so much blood on the ground,” said Soenthrith.

Because one of the injured was an American national – Rob Abney, who at the

<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-post-depth-politics/twenty-years-after-deadly-grenade-attack-threat-political-violence>



Police have arrested at least five suspects over the past two days in connection to a grenade attack that rattled a Phnom Penh neighbourhood two



Officials still have ‘no clue’ in grenade attack



Grenade attack injures three people in Phnom Penh



Ex-official tried in grenade case

time was working with the International Republican Institute – the FBI got involved. Their investigation was curtailed on the advice of then-US ambassador Kenneth Quinn, who allegedly did not want to rock diplomatic ties with Prime Minister Hun Sen.

The FBI's report, however, while not conclusive, suggested the involvement of the premier's Bodyguard Unit, which was present at the rally and allegedly made way for the perpetrators to escape.

Former ambassador Quinn and the US Embassy in Phnom Penh declined to comment for this story.

While violence was the preferred, and much more prevalent, *modus operandi* for silencing dissent 20 years ago, analysts say the threat still hangs over contemporary politics, though it has grown more tactical over the years.

Rainsy himself points to the unresolved high-profile killings of union leader Chea Vichea, environmentalist Chut Wutty and, more recently, Kem Ley – all falling in the past decade and a half – as evidence that the state's objective remains unchanged: to frighten the Cambodian people.

He contended that today's rapid spread of information, especially through Facebook, has reduced the need for such spectacular acts of violence, noting that since the attack 20 years ago, just a few gunshots have been enough to sow the seeds of fear rapidly across the country.

"Yes, there is less political violence. But this is not an improvement in the regime," he said. "One person killed is still one too many."

However, Sebastian Strangio, author of *Hun Sen's Cambodia*, noted that the decline of political violence had coincided with Hun Sen's steady consolidation of control over the country. Now, he added, it was restricted to "isolated bursts of bloodshed – especially at times of heightened political tension – of which Kem Ley's assassination is just the latest example".

"While it's hard to conclusively assign blame for this and other attacks, the message . . . is unambiguous. Opposition in Cambodia remains an occupation for the brave," he said.



People gather at the site of the March 30 grenade attack where one of the explosions left a hole in the pavement (foreground), killing at least 16 people and injuring 119. David Van Der Veen/AFP

The failure to thoroughly investigate the 1997 attack, even with an FBI report implicating state actors, he said, set the benchmark for a culture of impunity, and was emblematic of an unwillingness to investigate similar cases that has been repeatedly displayed over the last two decades.

This same impunity, Strangio added, was clearly visible when convictions were pinned on obvious scapegoats (released years later) in the killing of Chea Vichea, just as it was in the investigation into Ley's death, which was limited to the shooter and appeared to ignore the possibility of co-conspirators.

"While the scale and method are different, the common thread to his case and others is the lack of any credible investigation, and the rush to close the book on the case and declare it 'solved,'" he said.

Political commentator Meas Ny, meanwhile, agreed that the country had seen a decline in political violence but said that upcoming elections with commune polls this year and a national vote in 2018 would be the true test of whether or not the country will return to the bloody days of rampant political bloodshed.

He said two scenarios were possible if the ruling party saw its electoral hold on the country slipping: an increased use of violent tactics to suppress the opposition, or a scenario in which the CPP prepares for some kind of transition of power, as happened in Myanmar.

"But, if they lose more than they expect they could resort to strengthening the iron grip they have after the 2017 elections," he said.

Government spokesman Phay Siphon this week said that while it was unfortunate that Rainsy, then a parliamentarian, had been targeted in 1997, any blame assigned to the government for the attack was baseless.

He also maintained that in all cases, authorities did their best to find the real perpetrators, and those who suggested otherwise were merely malcontents. "The government never wants to see this happen," he said. "But if people are against the government, they will want to brand the government as bad."

Contact authors: Erin Handley and Ananth Baliga

MOST VIEWED

