



Interview with Mam Sonando

Cambodian human rights defender [Mam Sonando](#) is a finalist for the 2013 Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk. A journalist and President of the Association of Democrats, he was arrested in early July 2012 on charges of instigating insurrection and incitement to take up arms against the state. The following text is a transcript of a recently held interview of Mam Sonando, who is currently in prison where he is serving a 20 year sentence

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Q: Before your imprisonment, what kind of risks did you face conducting your work?

Sonando: I like challenges and I am actually surprised to have lived this long! (laughing). I am surprised every morning to be still alive. I guess that a god or Buddha has been protecting me all this time. But to me, the more dangerous it is, the more excited I am as long as it can play a role for all Cambodians.

Democracy, Human Rights, Justice.... everything is very bad in Cambodia because of our government. Being a radio owner as well as the president of the Association of Democrats is helpful to society. I know it is dangerous and that one person cannot save the world. But then, If nobody does it, who will? I want democracy and hope for the young generation of Cambodians.

I am trying to be an example for every Cambodian. After the Khmer Rouge regime, people were scared but started asking for democracy and were inspired by foreign countries. I did too and I demand democracy for Cambodia now. But I want to be fair and honest and I am not thinking about power or my own interests. Otherwise, I could not tell Cambodians to do the same.

Q: What motivated you to start the radio station and to continue with it in spite of the risks involved?

Sonando: Actually, getting a license for the radio station was an accident. I got it because my brother is affiliated with the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). I never wanted to be a politician. I simply wanted to broadcast the music and bits of the French society that I discovered during my stay in France in the 1960's. But with time, I changed my mind; politicians in power are lying, cheating and use power to scare people. I am disgusted by what they say and this is the reason why I want to rectify what they state. I am sad to see Cambodians living in distress and disarray. They only have the right to live but have nothing more.

Q: Why are you and other human rights defenders targeted by the government?

Sonando: I never compare myself to others. I know that if I succeed, Cambodia will succeed too. But the government wants to be the only one to do so and does not accept any auxiliary. The people at the top are just able to kill and threaten. After all, they are working as a communist regime. Today, even intellectuals – I mean people with diplomas from foreign universities – are coming back to the country but lack the courage to really act for their country. If I do the same, Cambodia will not be helped. I am only asking for democracy.

Q: What impact will the attention brought by your nomination for this award in Cambodia? What impact do you hope it will have?

Sonando: The nomination will have an impact for this award has never been received by a Cambodian before. I would never have thought I would be considered for it. This is a way of encouraging Cambodians to fight for the protection of human rights. If I have it, it will show to Cambodians those other persons that our officials are recognized in the world.

Q: You helped the poor in Cambodia. What lessons about human rights did you learn from these communities?

Sonando: When someone comes to you, you can feel if this person is sincere. The people I meet show me that honesty is crucial. Because I am true to them, they trust me in return. I have a strong personality and will also do everything I promised for them. Even if I am imprisoned. I'll live only once.