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**'DEMOCRACY IS DEAD IN CAMBODIA': DEPUTY OPPOSITION LEADER SPEAKS OUT**

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Since going into exile in October last year, Sochua has been one of many opposition politicians trying to raise international awareness about Cambodia's descent back into one party rule, and the ongoing violence and human rights violations taking place in their homeland. The deputy opposition leader of the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) would have been arrested if she stayed, just as the party's leader, Kem Sokha, was. Sokha is now languishing in jail, a prisoner of the strongman Prime Minister Hun Sen. Cambodia's national elections are due on July 29 and there are few credible opposition voices left in the country who can speak out. The CNRP morphed into the Cambodia National Rescue Movement (CNRM) in January, when opposition figures in exile such as Sochua and former opposition leader Sam Rainsy banded together. (They've even hired US PR firm BerlinRosen - who helped arrange this interview - to gather international attention to their cause). Now it's up to people like Sochua, and Rainsy to take the Cambodian opposition's message to world capitals. The United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva was due to formally discuss a report into the political situation in Cambodia overnight, Australian time. That report, released in February, found the Hun Sen regime has amended laws to suspend other political parties' operations, reduced civil and political rights, closed or suspended some NGOs operating in the country, shut down independent radio stations and imprisoned journalists. Sochua said the international community, which Cambodia depends on heavily for assistance, should be much tougher on the regime. "We need governments around the world to stand up and criticise and put pressure on Hun Sen. The only solution we think will work is economic sanctions," she says, adding the European Union and United States are moving towards tougher measures. "Australia has a very important role to play, too, but the government of Australia is still very careful about what they say, their actions." Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull met with Hun Sen during the ASEAN-Australia summit in Sydney last week, despite calls from the Cambodia diaspora and rights groups for him not to meet the dictator. Balancing those calls to action, though, is a desire on the part of Australia and other ASEAN member states to keep Cambodia - which is increasingly dependent on China - in their orbit. But Sochua says that as a new member of the UN's Human Rights Council, Australia should be speaking out about the regime's abuses. She suggests that in the upcoming elections only allies of Hun Sen will be allowed to stand. Twenty-seven years after the Paris Peace accords brought an end to war in her country, Sochua laments that "Democracy is dead in Cambodia". "Hun Sen does not have the people [of Cambodia] behind him. Nobody will run in the election except his allies, he will make sure he can say to the world it's a free and fair election - but it's a joke," she says.

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/democracy-is-dead-in-cambodia-deputy-opposition-leader->

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