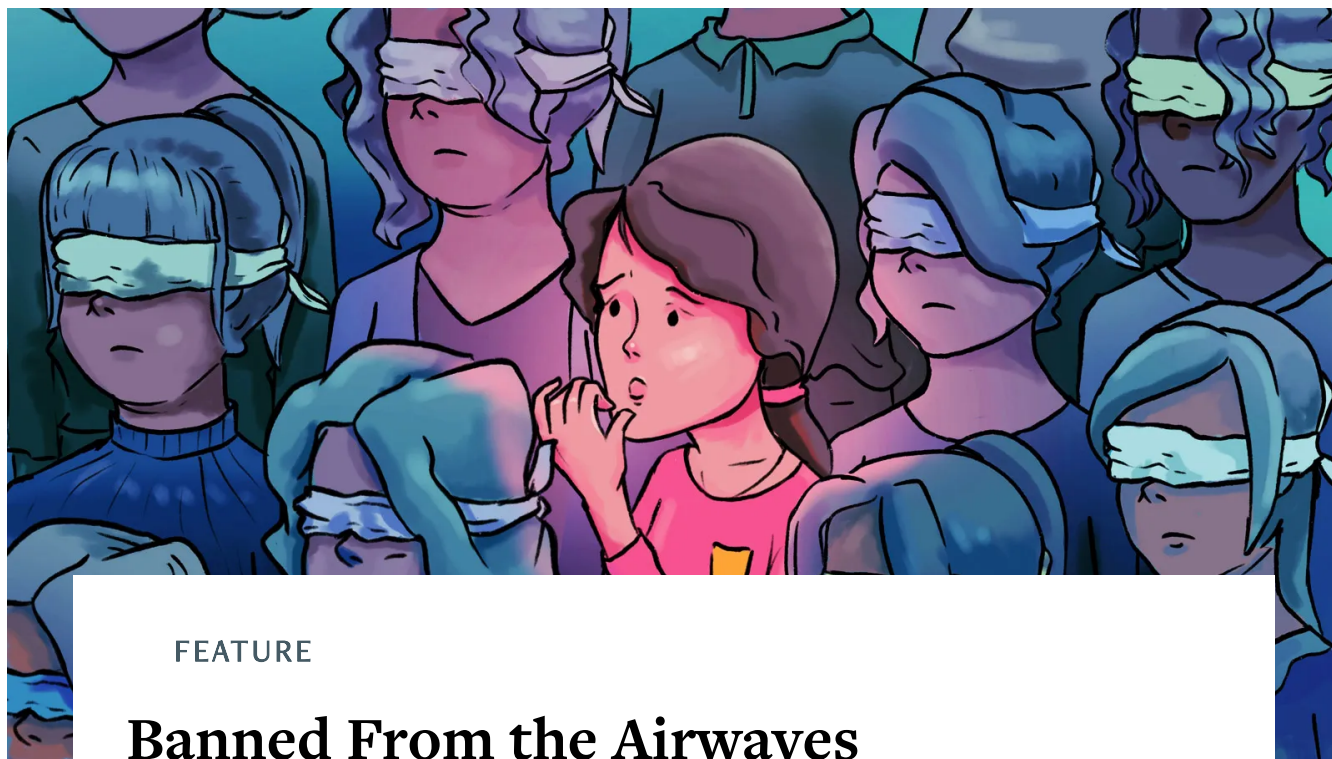


New Naratif



FEATURE

Banned From the Airwaves

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Cultural products, like pop music, might not be as overtly in opposition to the powerful in Cambodia, but aren't free from censorship or regulation. After all, controlling art is one way to control the narrative.

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A tear falls down the cheek of a young girl with long black hair, dressed in a pink blouse. Female singer Oeun Sreymom begins to tell her story in a voiceover: a tragic narrative of a young woman sent away from her family and sweetheart to work as a housemaid, only to find that she had actually been trafficked into prostitution.

“If I go in the water, I meet a crocodile. If I go in the street, I meet a tiger,” the song goes in Khmer.

angkor amatak 1 1



The song, *I Have Only My Honest Heart*, is a sad and sentimental tale of women from the Cambodian countryside, lured by the bright lights of the big city, being pushed into the sex industry. The song was released ten years ago by music production company Angkor Amatak, which has since shut down. But in September this year, the song was banned by Cambodia's Ministries of Information and Culture and Fine Arts, following a request made by the Ministry of Labour.

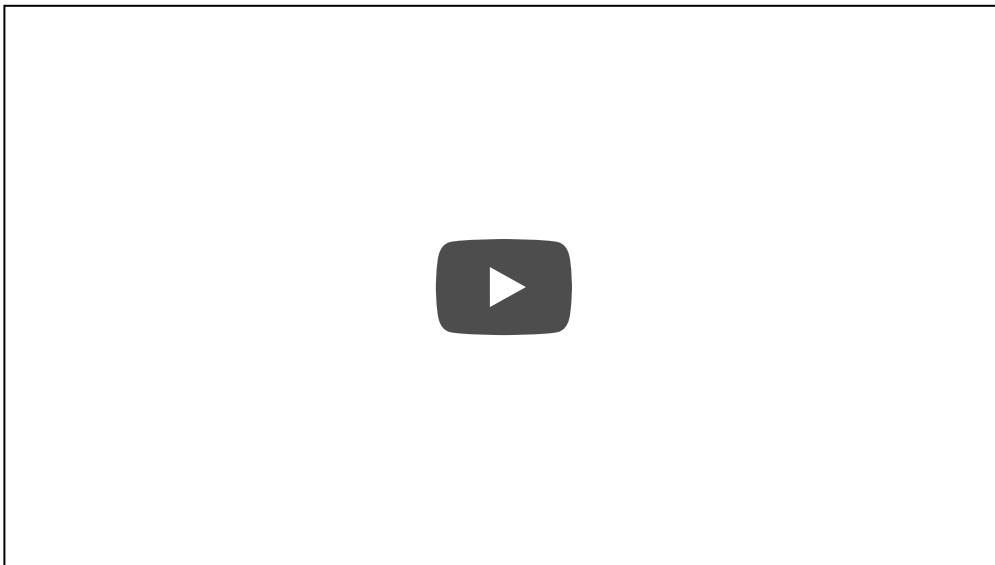
“The meaning of the song may have reflected the reality years ago, but presently, the life of domestic workers has improved because the government has been giving them protection and full rights”, said a [statement](#) from the Ministry of Information published in the *Khmer Times*. The ministry ordered all media to stop broadcasting the song.

The ban was supported by the Cambodian Domestic Workers Network, an independent local NGO. “On behalf of domestic workers in the country, we thank the government for taking care of them by banning the song which affects them,” it said in a statement.

I Have Only My Honest Heart isn't the only song to undergo this treatment. Another song was banned from the airwaves in October. *Missing Home for Pchum Ben*, performed by Mao Hari, had been released a year ago, and touched on the plight of

garment workers unable to visit their hometowns during the few days off they have per year: “Workers have not been paid, they cannot visit families in their hometown, so workers can only telephone them and shed tears.”

Again, the Ministry of Labour took issue with the song. Labour Minister Ith Sam Heng asked his counterparts in the two ministries overseeing the media to ban the song, saying that it “paints a grim picture of the government policy on Cambodian garment workers.”



Regulating the Arts and Entertainment

Cambodia’s art scene has come a long way since the days of the Khmer Rouge in the mid-to-late 1970s, where artists and intellectuals were systematically executed. There has since been a process of rebuilding, with artists reviving traditional Cambodian art while also welcoming foreign art forms that have given their creations a modern twist.

Artistic expression in Cambodia tends to be neither openly confrontational nor subversive. Most practitioners in the fields of visual or performance art seek more subtle ways to express their concerns about or commentary on society. But the music industry tends to be a little more overt, particularly with the use of lyrics that allow performers to be more explicit than their peers in the visual arts. This, coupled with the fact that the music and entertainment industry generates far more money and public

attention than other artistic endeavours, explains why songs are disproportionately affected by bans.

Credit: Monnyreak Ket

The music market is filled with songs about relationships (that generally end with infidelity, tears and revenge), domestic violence and suicide, but those aren't the songs that draw the attention of the authorities. Last year, the song *Drunk Teacher*, performed by the popular pop singer Khem, was banned for “insulting” and “humiliating” teachers, following a request from the Cambodian Independent Teachers' Association. The year before that, another of Khem's songs, *The Life of a Boxer*, had been forbidden after the national boxing federation complained that it presented a negative portrayal of an impoverished boxer. Two other songs—*If You Can Eat, Please Take As Much As You Can* by Keo Veasna and *It Will Take A Very Long Time To Eat Me* by Chan Malis—were also targeted for being too sexually suggestive.

But the authorities occasionally target other forms of art and entertainment, too. In 2015, the Ministry of Information prohibited foreign films from being broadcast on television between the hours of 5pm–7pm, a move intended to “restore Cambodian culture and Khmer movies” in response growing interest in foreign dramas, especially from neighbouring Thailand. In 2011, it banned a cover of the classic song *Or Phnom Penh Euy*, as the ministry found a pop remix of the iconic track “improper”. In 2009,

when the Ministry of Social Affairs blocked a beauty contest for women maimed by landmines, the Ministry of Information praised this decision saying “[the contest would] make a mockery of Cambodia’s landmine victims”.

Even celebrities can incur the wrath of the censor. Last year, 24-year-old actress Denny Kwan was ordered not to appear on television, in film or to sing karaoke on air for a year, after her outfits were judged “too sexy” and “provocative”. The authorities even asked artist associations and production companies not to give her any work.

Although she initially denounced the decision, she later toned down her response and said she would accept the order. “I will try not to be sexy as I usually am when I post on Facebook”, she [told](#) the *Phnom Penh Post* in April 2017. Women’s rights groups, though, denounced the order, describing it as “appalling” and an example of gender-based discrimination.

The ban on Kwan was lifted in May, but she has since walked away from the entertainment industry and now runs an online business selling cosmetics. She now posts short videos touting the benefits of her products on her Facebook page—where her follower count has doubled over the past year—while dressed in the same sexy outfits that had drawn the ire of the authorities. But what was considered inappropriate when she was a performer now goes without comment in her new role as an entrepreneur. She had initially agreed to speak to *New Naratif* about her experience, but was later uncontactable.

A Broader Climate of Censorship

These heavy-handed reactions to and micromanaging of Cambodia’s arts and culture industry occur in a wider context of control over freedom of expression in the country. Since 2016, about a dozen of citizens have been convicted in Cambodia for expressing critical opinions on Facebook, under a range of laws relating to offences like defamation, incitement and, more recently, lese majeste.

In the run-up to the elections in July 2018, the government clamped down on political opposition, silenced activists and decimated the independent media. Following this,

Prime Minister Hun Sen unsurprisingly led his party to victory at the polls, continuing his 33-year rule uninterrupted.

The elections are now over, but the ripple effects of the crackdown continue to be felt throughout Cambodia's civic space, leading to heightened caution and self-censorship among the populace. It's only natural that this tension has spilled over into the cultural sphere; while cultural products might not be as explicit in their criticism of the powerful as political opponents, exerting control over pop culture and art can allow one to control the narrative and smooth the image of both the country and its government domestically. Acts of censorship over the local arts scene are also often consequence-free, contained as they are within the local market with little impact felt internationally.

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Ou Virak, founder of the think-tank Future Forum, points out that Cambodia is a small and isolated country on the international art market. And that's not the only factor: "Even if there is some international attention, I am not sure if it is politically winnable without local public support."

"While I think we have seen impressive progress these last years, most Cambodian people themselves [see] little value [in] freedom of culture and the arts," he adds. "These measures from the government are popular with the people; we are still a conservative society when it comes to art and music."

Phoearn Sackona, the Minister for Culture and Fine Arts, defends the recent ban of *I Have Only My Honest Heart*. "I am following the decision of the Ministry of Labour, because the meaning of the song affects women who work as housemaids. The song lets people think that all women who work in this sector have experienced bad treatment, and that is not true," she writes in an email to *New Naratif*.

“The ministry’s decision-making is due to the public; they are critical and post comments on social media that are reported to us,” says Thai Norak Satya, the ministry’s spokesperson. “These issues are then discussed in different committees, such as the Committee of Appreciation and the Committee for Banning Artists, as well as other institutions.”

“In our society, the writers’ freedom of expression is very powerful. However, some individuals [have] crossed boundaries,” he adds. “There is no law that clearly states how one should behave or wear. But in our society, we always brag about having a beautiful culture and traditions, so we should be responsible in how we speak, what we do, and how we express ourselves.”


Indifference or Frustration: The Artists React

Behind the door of an office building in the residential neighbourhood of Toul Kork in Phnom Penh, several musicians are napping on a big couch. Meas Sok Rathnak, the head of Town Production, the music studio that produced many of the recently banned songs, welcomes visitors into his tiny offices.

Town Production is one of the leading companies in the Cambodian music industry, working with a dozen songwriters and 20 to 30 singers to release a 20-song album every month. Rathnak is also the brother and manager of Meas Sok Sophea, currently one of Cambodia’s most famous singers.

“If some people are hurt because of our songs, we need to step back and take it into account”, the 40-year-old says calmly. “Last month, people from the ministries came here, they showed us documents about their work [and] asked us to be careful with the lyrics. They were cordial. It’s a negotiation. But I can’t really say no.”

Rathnak smiles. “As Khmer, we have our own culture. We are born with this culture and we have [a sense of] what we can do or not, we don’t need someone tell it to us.”



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In a coffee shop a few streets down from the studio, Yem Tasrong holds a cigarette in one hand and a latte in the other. He’s one of Town Production’s more prolific songwriters, but is also working on launching his own music company. He co-wrote *Drunk Teacher*, one of the banned songs.

The lyrics were, he says, inspired by one of his former teachers. The story was dramatised in a music video: through long flashbacks, viewers realise that the old teacher drinks to escape the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime, haunted by having witnessed the murder of his wife and young daughter.

It doesn’t seem to bother Tasrong that several of his songs have been banned and thus stopped from reaching their intended audience. “I just write my songs. If people like it, it’s good. If some don’t and they are banned, it’s okay. The bans have no impact on my way of working,” he says, puffing on his cigarette.

The Internet—and how its changed consumer habits—appears be working in his favour. “In Cambodia, people don’t listen to the radio anymore, they don’t buy CDs anymore, so people can bypass the bans. Even if we remove the songs from the official YouTube pages, some people repost the songs [on other pages].”

But other artists don't share Tasrong's indolence. "There's nothing wrong with these [banned] songs. The authorities [are wasting] their time, and the people can't be fooled," says Vartey Ganiva, a 24-year-old punk rock singer with long, bleached blonde hair. She made her debut in 2016 with the song *Evil Husband*, which addresses domestic violence.

"[The government] may be more careful with lyrics related to workers, because, in terms of demography, workers are powerful" she says, alluding to Cambodia's highly profitable garment industry—one that might potentially be facing tough times, following the European Union's announcement of its intention to suspend the Everything But Arms agreement with Cambodia.

"I want people to listen to my songs and think," Ganiva adds. "I would like to write about poor people, about social issues or the environment. It's meaningful when you can express yourself through music."

For Rithy Lomorpich, a 26-year-old artist who is part of the country's emerging independent art scene, censorship is inherently detrimental to artistic expression. "Art does not have to reflect reality. It plays with reality and doesn't follow a political agenda. If not, it's propaganda," she says.

Lomorpich—who has co-founded an art festival, launched a platform to promote original music, and directed her first feature film—the concern is not just about the censorship of specific works, but how this practice can stifle the culture and creativity of Cambodia's fledgling arts scene.

"As a citizen and artist, I feel insecure about creating something out of the box. Self-censorship limits creativity. There is always a question mark at the back of my head," she explains. "For example, in my movie, I shot teenagers driving their motorbikes without helmets. And I had this question in mind: would it be accepted by the censors?"

"The problem in Cambodia is that the laws are unclear, everything is blurred, and there is only a one-way communication from the government to artists".

Eléonore Sok

Eléonore Sok is a journalist, author and photographer based in Cambodia since 2015. She is correspondent for European newspapers and radios, covering mostly politics, environment and culture. She also works on long-term personal stories in the field of image.

More By Eléonore Sok

Monnyreak Ket

Monnyreak Ket is a Designer, Illustrator and Hand Lettering artist who's working in merging Cambodian art, Phnom Penh scenery and conveying emotional honesty message with modern graphic, dream-like composition and using vibrant yet neutral and desaturated colour scheme.

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