

Laos is something of a void on the human rights map these days – a small, land-locked country that projects an image of peace and harmony, largely stays out of the international media, and secures ever-growing wads of development cash.

A casual observer might take this to mean that things are all well. We live in an era where information is abundant, after all. We read almost daily about horrific human rights abuses in virtually every country in the world. And we fall into the trap of thinking that a lack of information correlates with a lack of problems – or at least that the problems are not as bad as in other countries.

But that is a horribly misguided assessment, of course, for Laos is like few countries I know.

I first began to understand few years back, when I had my first encounter with members of Laos' civil society at an international conference. My overriding impression from these individuals was the profound and all-encompassing fear that engulfed them. Their lack of trust was palpable. They did not want to talk to me with others present. They did not even want to be seen with me.

I have never seen anything quite like it. These individuals were like islands – operating in apparent isolation, prevented from exercising their fundamental human right to connect with others who shared their concerns.

Over time I learned why. Secret police had infiltrated Laos' civil society delegation. I was told that this was routine, both at home and abroad. Things – and people – are never what they seem in Laos. And that means you play your cards close to the vest. If you don't, the risks are high, as we saw so vividly with the disappearance of Sombath Somphone three years ago.

And Sombath's case seems to have only created more trepidation, which is a tragic irony. He dared to affirm his convictions, and his courage and dedication should be an inspiration. Instead, it is viewed as a warning. The culture of fear is that deep.

This culture, of course, is toxic to a thriving civil society movement. Activism is based on connections, relationships, discourse, and open discussion. None of this is possible when fear crushes people's very ability to talk to one other.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that we in the United Nations human rights system have so few contacts with activists inside Laos. Or that we have so little information. And it is not for lack of trying: I have requested the Government of Laos to invite me to conduct an official assessment mission to the country every year since I became Special Rapporteur in 2011. I have met and lobbied Government officials in Geneva and New York asking to be officially invited. All my efforts have been for naught.

Unfortunately, this information gap only feeds the cycle of fear. For if one thing can counter fear, it is knowledge and information, particularly the knowledge that you are not alone and that others share your concerns.

This is why this book is so important. If Laos is indeed a void on the human rights map, Anne-Sophie Gindroz has filled it with vivid color and detail. And in doing so, she has pierced a veil of sorts. Fear now has a face: its contours are visible; its effects are documented; its insidiousness is laid bare; and ultimately, its absurdity is apparent.

The book also makes clear that the Laotians I met few years ago are not alone. There are many of them, throughout the country, waiting for the chance to speak out. It might not be today, or tomorrow, but my hope is that this book brings them all one step closer to that day when freedom from fear shall be theirs.

And I hope that this book stirs some reflection and inflection within the international community, especially those involved in “development” in Laos, but whose actions and omissions make them party to this culture of silence and fear.

In Solidarity,

Maina Kiai

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association