

Cambodia's Election Was a Foregone Conclusion

Monday 14 August 2023, by [LEANG Sok](#) (Date first published: 28 July 2023).

As Hun Sen hands power to his son, could a new generation restore democratic norms?

Cambodia held a general election on 23 July, its seventh since parliamentary democracy was instituted in 1993. This time around, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won in a landslide, claiming 120 of 125 parliamentary seats — slightly down from its 2018 result, when it took all 125.

Yet the main reason for these victories was less the popularity of the CPP itself than the absence of the main opposition parties, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), banned and dissolved in 2017, and the Candlelight Party (CLP), which, although still legal, was disqualified from participating. Their removal from competition effectively made the result a foregone conclusion and the vote itself a mere formality.

Prior to these two latest elections, Cambodian elections resembled those in any multi-party democracy, with exciting, competitive election campaigns, an anxious election night, and an uncertain outcome until all the votes were tallied. But this is no longer the case. Cambodia's leading opposition figures, such as Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, are either exiled or under house arrest. Now, the country's long-serving leader, Prime Minister Hun Sen, has designated his son Hun Manet to succeed him, suggesting that a return to democratic norms is not on the cards any time soon.

Hun Sen's Staying Power

The passing on of power to his son represents the culmination of Hun Sen's storied career. Sen first assumed the premiership of the country in 1985, when he was 42 years old. He has remained in the position ever since, accumulating 38 years in power and making him Asia's longest-serving leader. Sen rose to power in the People's Republic of Kampuchea, the Vietnamese-backed state that ruled Cambodia throughout the 1980s, six years after Vietnamese-backed forces toppled the Khmer Rouge regime that killed approximately 2 million innocent people between 1975 and 1979.

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, Cambodia organized its first, UN-sponsored election under the pretext of the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991. Hun Sen's CPP, the new name given to the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party that ruled the country under Vietnamese tutelage, failed to win the election, with the majority of seats going to the pro-monarchy National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC). Yet Sen managed to negotiate his way to becoming Second Prime Minister, engaging in a more or less equal power-sharing agreement with the First Prime Minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh.

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Sen engineered a coup d'état in 1997 that ousted Ranariddh, and has won every election since. That

said, for most of his tenure, elections at least appeared competitive and a degree of opposition was permitted. After taking all 125 seats in 2018, this time around five seats were allocated to the FUNCINPEC, perhaps to dodge accusations that Cambodia has become a one-party state. In reality, however, it has long been precisely that, with Hun Sen at the apex.

Shutting Down the Opposition

The CNRP was dissolved by the Supreme Court in 2017 in a highly controversial decision. Four years earlier, the party won 55 seats in the 2013 election and was looking forward to a possible victory in the 2018 contest before it was dissolved in November 2017, a bit more than half-a-year before the general election. Since then, senior CNRP politicians were banned from politics for five years, while others faced legal harassment and prosecution. Party leader Sam Rainsy had seen the party's vote total increase steadily since 1998, from 15 seats to 55. The last election in which the party was allowed to compete, the June 2017 communal elections, saw the CNRP win 43.85 percent of the popular vote, as compared to 50.76 percent for the CPP.

For this year's election, the CLP was disqualified on a technicality, namely failure to submit the correct paperwork to the country's National Election Committee (NEC). CLP leaders had requested a meeting with the Ministry of the Interior in order to certify that the party had registered, and were reassured that they had done so correctly. The NEC, however, saw things differently, and insisted that the party failed to submit the correct registration document. The party's disqualification sparked a great deal of frustration and outrage among party officials and supporters, who remained unconvinced by the NEC's explanations and justifications.

Around the same time that the CLP was disqualified, the party participated in the 2022 communal elections and won roughly 22.25 percent of the popular vote. That election was widely seen as indicator of how strong of an opposition the CLP could be following the CNRP's dissolution. Had they maintained their 2022 results in last week's general election, it may have sufficed to win a significant parliamentary presence and slow down the ruling party's agenda — particularly Hun Sen's attempt to transfer power to his eldest son.

Not satisfied with banning and disqualifying the main opposition parties, the government has gone even further by introducing provisions that prevent any person from standing for election who failed to vote in the previous two elections. This means that if a citizen failed to go the polls in last week's general election and the 2027 communal election, he or she will effectively be ineligible to stand for the next parliamentary election in 2028. Given that most opposition figures are currently in self-imposed exile to avoid prosecution, it is not hard to ascertain who this new law will target.

Capitalizing on Social Issues

Over the years, Cambodia's opposition has sought to use existing social and economic issues facing everyday citizens, such as low pay, the growing gap between the rich and poor, deforestation, environmental degradation, exploitation of natural resources, corruption, as well as human rights violations to bolster their political platforms. After all, given the CPP's dominance, its officials can be held accountable for practically anything that goes wrong in the country.

Moreover, the opposition has cited wide-ranging violations of labour rights, land rights, freedom of expression and the press, and a lack of confidence in the legal system to name a few, promising to rectify the situation should they assume power. Recently, anger has brewed around high levels of personal indebtedness and the proliferation of online finance platforms that trick people into taking out questionable loans — another issue that the opposition would be able to exploit to its benefit were it allowed to compete in the election to begin with.

Recent CPP governments have issued various policies, strategies, and interventions to deal with worsening social issues, while at the same time pointing to annual economic growth rates of around 7 percent for the past decade as evidence that the situation for everyday Cambodians is improving. Yet more often than not, rather than effectively address the actual issues on the ground, the government has instead taken measures to suppress and crack down on criticism and dissent — the path it chose once again prior to the recent election.

International Pressure and Domestic Determination

Cambodia's rigged election was met with severe criticism both at home and internationally. Yet international criticism seems to have very little, if any effect. The CPP's consolidation of power ensures that the legislative process can continue under its control undisturbed.

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Cambodia's trade relations with the West cooled over the last few years, as reports of human rights violations, restrictions on freedom of expression and the press, and repression of dissent of all stripes proliferated. Both the US and EU have cut off Cambodia's duty-free access to their markets since 2020, calling on the government to address these issues. Yet economic pressure and diplomatic warnings from the West are becoming less and less effective as Cambodia boosts its economic cooperation with China, now its largest trading partner as well as its biggest lender, holding more than 40 percent of Cambodia's total foreign debt.

International media outlets dubbed the election unfree and unfair, but the Prime Minister does not seem to care anymore and regards this as a normal response. In a recent interview, he stated that as a sovereign nation, as long as Cambodia's citizens vote and the result is recognized by the people, nothing else matters. Rather than easing tensions, the government is moving to enact more restrictions.

Change on the Horizon?

Days after winning his expected victory, Hun Sen announced that he would step down as prime minister, making way for his eldest son to take his place. This marks a significant moment in Cambodia's post-conflict political history, but one that came as no surprise, as it has long been not a question of “if” but “when”.

The outgoing prime minister will continue to serve as the President of CPP and will move to become Head of the Supreme Privy Council and President of the Senate in February 2024, when the senatorial election is held. These three key positions will give him final say over most of the party's and the nation's decision-making.

Debates have now started over whether a new, Western-educated generation of leaders will usher in a new tradition of leadership that adheres to democratic principles and the rule of law, or whether they have been effectively groomed to continue the tradition their predecessors built and entrusted them to take over. For now, it seems, Asia's longest-serving leader may have ended his premiership, but his dynasty will continue.

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