

Cambodia in 2018

Requiem for Multiparty Politics

ABSTRACT

In 2018, ever-incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen scored a landslide victory in the Cambodian general elections. Three factors in particular explain this outcome. First, the elimination of the main opposition party, whose strategy of a peaceful election boycott failed. Second, favorable economic conditions and government handouts of spoils to constituencies that traditionally supported the opposition. Third, the weak leverage of the United States and the EU, and the Hun Sen regime's strong links with China.

KEYWORDS: Authoritarianism, elections, repression, Cambodia-China relations, succession

ELECTIONS AND THE END OF MULTIPARTY POLITICS

After two narrow elections in 2013 and 2017, the government deployed its full organizational power in 2018 to ensure a complete victory in the National Assembly election on July 29. The previous year, on September 5, opposition leader Kem Sokha had been arrested, and on November 16, the Supreme Court ordered the dissolution of the main opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). In February 2018, the parliament passed constitutional amendments allowing the government to take action against any political party that does not “place the country and nation’s interest first.” Officials could also take action to prevent “interference” by foreign countries in Cambodia’s domestic affairs.¹ Later that month, the Cambodian People’s

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1. Human Rights Watch, “Cambodia: Legislating New Tools of Repression,” New York, February 14, 2018, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/14/cambodia-legislating-new-tools-repression>>.

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Party (CPP) of Prime Minister Hun Sen ran unopposed in the Senate elections. The government then intensified its surveillance and repression of journalists and civil society, and targeted Cambodia's trade union movement, a traditional ally of the CNRP. At the same time, the prime minister made overtures toward the 700,000 workers in the garment sector, including cash gifts to workers who attended his rallies, initiatives to reduce the cost of living for factory workers, and a higher minimum wage.

Twenty political parties stood for the ballot, but with the CNRP dissolved and its leaders being sent to jail or having fled the country, there was no credible challenge to the CPP. Exiled CNRP members, including former party leader Sam Rainsy, launched the Clean Finger Boycott Campaign (the name refers to the ink used to indicate that someone voted in the election). The government responded by threatening that nonvoters would be considered traitors and possibly fined or imprisoned. CPP cadres and military and police officers intimidated voters, especially in areas of strong CNRP support, and senior members of the security forces openly campaigned for Hun Sen.² A number of senior military officials ran as CPP candidates in the general election.

About 8.4 million Cambodians registered to cast their ballots, 1.3 million less than in the 2013 general elections. Especially in the former CNRP strongholds, fewer voters registered. Yet the call for an election boycott failed, and the opposition lacked the ability to organize post-election mass protests. The official turnout rate increased, from 70% of registered voters in 2013 to 83% in 2018. Still, significant numbers of CNRP supporters seem to have spoiled their ballots to signal their protest against the vote itself. Invalid votes totaled 8.5% in 2018, representing the second-largest group of voters (Table 1). The numbers were especially high in provinces widely considered CNRP strongholds. The CPP won 77% of the total valid vote and all 125 seats in the National Assembly, up from 49% of the votes and 65 seats in 2013.

Respected domestic election monitors who had monitored Cambodian polls in the past decided to withdraw from this year's election. The US, the EU, Japan, Canada, and Australia also declined to send election observers.

2. Reuters, "Rulers Cajole and Coerce Voters to Boost Election Turnout," Phnom Penh, July 25, 2018, <[https://www.reuters.com/article/us-Cambodia's-cambodia-election-threats/cambodias-rulers-cajole-and-coerce-voters-to-boost-election-turnout-idUSKBN1KFoLQ?;](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-Cambodia's-cambodia-election-threats/cambodias-rulers-cajole-and-coerce-voters-to-boost-election-turnout-idUSKBN1KFoLQ?) Human Rights Watch, "Cambodia: Hun Sen's Abusive Generals," New York, June 28, 2018, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/28/cambodia-hun-sens-abusive-generals>>.

TABLE I. Official Results of the 2018 Cambodian General Elections

<i>Province</i>	<i>Registered voters</i>		<i>Voter turnout (%)</i>		<i>Invalid ballots (%)</i>		<i>CPP % of popular vote</i>	
	2013	2018	2013	2018	2013	2018	2013	2018
Banteay Meanchey	471,820	355,612	54.16	75.3	1.79	5.95	59.21	73.55
Battambang	706,874	565,044	60.36	77.65	2.06	7.4	53.54	73.7
Kampong Cham*	1,285,845	576,550	69.68	81.6	1.52	10.9	42.63	72.92
Kampong Chhnang	322,956	310,954	75.81	87.35	1.35	6.04	51.06	75.80
Kampong Speu	591,508	503,483	76.67	89.48	1.3	9.57	45.81	79.63
Kampong Thom	437,404	384,759	65.49	80.99	1.62	6.80	45.70	68.56
Kampot	436,402	365,458	68.96	85.22	1.95	8.58	49.90	72.94
Kandal	843,522	732,572	77.83	86.3	1.18	11.34	40.32	80.23
Koh Kong	78,387	64,647	55.94	81.56	2.58	5.69	67.02	79.81
Kratié	208,952	189,803	68.63	81.69	1.74	6.79	50.45	75.95
Mondulkiri	37,028	40,604	65.49	82.69	2.92	5.26	73.82	80.41
Phnom Penh	998,827	866,347	66.46	80.04	0.99	14.46	39.15	77.78
Preah Vihear	124,844	123,638	68.58	84.51	4.05	5.31	65.65	77.05
Prey Veng	809,020	661,042	71.21	82.06	1.3	9.73	44.26	75.29
Pursat	278,044	256,145	72.6	86.89	1.3	4.22	71.33	86.83
Ratanakiri	84,163	95,381	63.68	82.43	3.66	5.26	75.61	81.57
Siem Reap	576,114	535,521	68.66	78.91	2.2	7.18	49.91	70.17
Preah Sihanouk	126,937	124,072	68.59	83.01	2.59	7.07	59.99	75.47
Stung Treng	67,538	77,987	68.99	82.25	2.78	4.53	75.12	79.4
Svay Rieng	398,807	352,061	75.58	87.04	1.55	7.08	61.75	80.5
Takéo	660,151	585,564	78.41	87.29	1.52	9.01	48.13	80.96
Kep	25,665	24,377	77.86	91.02	1.81	4.16	72.87	82.15
Pailin	30,312	38,151	68.24	79.21	2.15	6.55	61.42	80.69
Oddar Meanchey	136,333	123,037	59.76	80.54	2.66	5.04	60.33	78.64
Tboung Khmum*		427,408		84.2		8.01		80.63
Grand Total	9,675,433	8,380,217	69.61	83.01	1.6	8.54	48.83	76.84

SOURCE: COMFREL, “Final Assessment and Report on the 2013 National Assembly Elections”, Phnom Penh, 2013, <https://comfrel.org/english/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/25_Final_Report_and_Assessment_National_Assembly_Elections_Final.pdf>; National Election Committee, “Results of the National Assembly Election of July 29, 2018,” Phnom Penh, August 18, 2018, <https://www.neclect.org.kh/khmer/sites/default/files/images-attachment/provisional-result_0.jpg>.

* On December 13, 2013, a royal decree split Kampong Cham into two provinces: Kampong Cham and Tboung Khmum.

Instead, a number of organizations with close ties to the government were formed to monitor the elections. They included the Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia, led by Hun Sen's youngest son, Hun Many, which contributed almost half of all monitors registered by the National Election Committee.³ According to the government, there were also hundreds of foreign observers from dozens of countries, but these were mostly "zombie monitors" with little or no experience in election monitoring or a documented history of praising flawed elections, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

A STRONG ECONOMY, BUT SOME RISKS

In addition to the elimination of the CNRP and the effective suppression of dissent, the favorable economic climate also helped the government. Cambodia has been the sixth-fastest-growing economy worldwide over the past two decades. In 2018, the GDP is expected to grow by 7%, driven especially by rising merchandise exports. Prospects for the years to come remain favorable. The EU remains Cambodia's biggest market, followed by the US. China, Vietnam, and South Korea remained key investors in 2017 (data for 2018 are not yet available), while China, Japan, and the EU provided the most development-related assistance. A 73% rise in tourist arrivals from the PRC in January through July sustained growth in international tourist arrivals at 11%. Good weather in 2018 supported robust agricultural output.⁴ Overall positive macroeconomic development has helped boost the income of poor households, along with the higher minimum wage for garment and footwear workers, raised to US\$ 170 per month in 2018. On October 5, the Labor Department announced another raise, to US\$ 182, effective January 2019. Wages have also risen in the public sector, and poverty continues to fall,

3. Reuters, "Election Monitoring Groups in Cambodia Headed by PM's Son, 'Ambassador'," Phnom Penh, July 20, 2018, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-election-monitors/election-monitoring-groups-in-cambodia-headed-by-pms-son-ambassador-idUSKBN1KAoFS>>.

4. World Bank, "East Asia and Pacific Economic Update October 2018," p. 16, <<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/30447/9781464813665.pdf>>; Asian Development Bank, "Asian Development Outlook 2018: How Technology Affects Jobs," Manila, April 2018, <<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/411666/ado2018.pdf>>; Asian Development Bank, "Asian Development Outlook 2018: Update: Maintaining Stability and Heightened Uncertainty," Manila, <<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/452971/ado2018-update.pdf>>.

albeit more slowly than in the past. The main economic risks are the erosion of export competitiveness due to higher labor costs and sluggish labor productivity, a prolonged real estate and construction boom, and a luxury property bubble in Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville, fueled by predominantly Chinese investors. Other structural obstacles to further rapid growth and economic diversification include high costs for electricity and logistics, and skills shortages.

WEAK WESTERN LEVERAGE AND STRONG CHINESE LINKS

As Cambodia backslides into one-party rule, China has become Hun Sen's closest supporter and ally. The kingdom has reached the second rank in China's foreign aid list. Beijing invested US\$ 9 billion between 2010 and 2016, according to a US Department of State report, and doubled its investment in 2017.⁵ But Sino–Khmer cooperation extends well beyond the economy. Diplomatic and military ties, social links (including tourism, student exchange, and a growing Chinese diaspora in Cambodia), and information links are also deepening. Beijing significantly stepped up aid and training for the Cambodian military, and the militaries of the two countries now regularly carry out joint exercises (called Dragon Gold). China's ambassador, Xiong Bo, attended a CPP rally at the beginning of the campaign for the general election. On July 10, 2018, midway through the campaign, the Export-Import Bank of China and Cambodia's Ministry of Finance signed a US\$ 259 million loan to fund a ring road in Phnom Penh.⁶ Hun Sen returned the favor in his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 28, in which he appeared as a fervent supporter of China in a time of growing tensions between the US and China. At the same time, China has gotten more involved with Cambodian media, for example launching a new TV station called NICE TV.

In contrast to China's rising influence, Cambodian relations with the US and the EU have again deteriorated. After issuing warnings about the

5. S. Custer, B. Russell, M. DiLorenzo, M. Cheng, S. Ghose, J. Sims, J. Turner, and H. Desai, "Ties That Bind: Quantifying China's Public Diplomacy and Its 'Good Neighbor' Effect," AidData, William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA, 2018, <<http://www.aiddata.org/publications/ties-that-bind>>; "Investment in Cambodia Nearly Doubles in 2017," *Phnom Penh Post*, March 7, 2018, <<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/investment-cambodia-nearly-doubles-2017>>.

6. Reuters, "China Lends Cambodia \$259 Million to Build New Road," Phnom Penh, July 20, 2018, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-china/china-lends-cambodia-259-million-to-build-new-road-idUSKBN1KAO66>>.

government's anti-democratic behavior, the US and EU pulled their support from the National Election Committee and refused to send electoral monitors. When the newly elected National Assembly held its first session, on September 5, representatives from the EU and the US refrained from attending. Washington also announced cuts in military and financial aid and imposed targeted sanctions on Cambodian officials. In May, the US House of Representatives passed the bipartisan Cambodia Democracy Act, which is now before the Senate and would provide for additional sanctions on the regime. Initially, the EU appeared more reluctant than the US to impose sanctions. In October, however, the EU announced that it would withdraw Cambodia's preferential trade access known as Everything But Arms. Although this involves further decision-making that could take a year, it would be a major economic shock for Cambodia.

The role of China as a regional power that provides alternative sources of economic, military, and diplomatic support for the Cambodian government clearly limits Western leverage over Hun Sen, reducing the cost of authoritarian abuse and mitigating the potential impact of punitive action by the West. Still, in his speech to the UN General Assembly, Hun Sen tried to glue a veneer of democratic legitimacy on the rigged elections, which indicates that he still cares what the West thinks. In September, to ease domestic tensions and restore international legitimacy, 21 political activists and journalists were released from prison or house arrest, including CNRP leader Kem Sokha, who is under house arrest in the capital as of this writing.

OUTLOOK

With the CNRP dissolved and no opposition in parliament, Hun Sen is looking to extend his 33-year rule for at least five more years. While there still is considerable support for the CNRP in society, three factors in particular will buffer the stability of his rule. First, Beijing will probably continue to help sustain it. Second, the legitimacy of Hun Sen's rule is based on his past and current successes in bringing peace, stability, and basic economic development to a war-torn country. In the long term, social and economic transformations may produce conditions that weaken the regime's time-proven systems of control. For now, there is little indication of such a development, especially since the opposition is too weak to initiate a peaceful mass uprising against the regime. In early December, Sam Rainsy declared himself leader of

the CNRP until Kem Sokha is released from house arrest, raising the possibility of a damaging split between his own party wing and Sokha's faction.⁷

Third, another five years in power will buy Hun Sen more time to prepare for the eventual transfer of power to one of his three sons. The eldest, Hun Manet, was promoted in September to commander of the armed forces, the second-most powerful position in the country's military. Hun Manet leads a powerful intelligence department, while Hun Maneth runs the CPP's youth wing.⁸ Although not all members of the regime's inner circle may welcome hereditary succession, it has the advantage that it does not invite a struggle for power between senior elites that could threaten regime survival. History suggests that for the CPP elites, their own survival comes first.

7. Alex Willemyns, "Cambodia's Opposition Begins to Crack," *The Diplomat*, December 12, 2018, <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/cambodias-opposition-begins-to-crack>>.

8. South China Morning Post, "Cambodian PM Hun Sen's Eldest Son Promoted to Commander of Armed Forces," September 6, 2018, <<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2163105/hun-sens-eldest-son-promoted-commander-cambodian-armed>>.