



NEWSLETTER



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The following Newsletter presents an overview of recent developments of the Electoral Reform Talks of the bipartisan Electoral Reform Commission.

The 5th parliamentary election was held last year on the 28th of July with eight political parties registered. The National Election Committee (NEC) announced the victory of the Cambodian's People Party (CPP) acquiring 68 seats in the National Assembly (NA), while the opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) received 55 seats. Results released by the NEC were rejected and accused by the opposition side of favoring the ruling party. CNRP leader Sam Rainsy demanded to establish an independent committee to investigate into election irregularities.

Despite such opposition claims, in September 2013, His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni officially inaugurated the first National Assembly meeting with 68 CPP parliamentary members, while the opposition party continues to reject the election result and boycotts the National Assembly. On Monday 31st of March, the second session of the NA was opened. Nevertheless the parliament sent an invitation to CNRP to join the session, the opposition party still refuses to take part. Son Chhay, CNRP whip and head of the party's negotiation team with the CPP on election reform states that "it would be better for the CPP to wait for CNRP to take part after a political resolution is reached." CNRP leaders are demanding either an investigation into election irregularities or early polls before joining the NA.

In February 2014, CPP and CNRP agreed to form a Bipartisan Electoral Reform Commission with an equal number of representatives from both parties to discuss key points of electoral reform. After the first meeting of the joint CPP-CNRP meeting, both parties released a statement agreeing on two key reform areas namely "the improvement of voter registration and voter lists to ensure that the rights of all voters are protected", and "the organization of the draft of a new law on political parties financing", proposed by the CPP.



Source: www.rfa.org

After the second talk on the 10th of March at the Senate, which mainly focused on reforming the NEC both parties struggled to reach an agreement. CNRP demands to create an independent NEC that needs 2/3 of the National Assembly Members supporting votes to be elected. With this process, CNRP wants to ensure that NEC is a political-neutralized body, but this demand was rejected by the CPP. Mr. Sik Bunhok, a CPP Delegate, claimed that his party could not be expected to approve the proposition made by the CNRP, since requiring 2/3 of 123 seats in the National Assembly would create a political deadlock in the appointment of the NEC. "If the NEC cannot be created, it will cause problems in holding national elections. If national elections cannot be held within its mandates, it will cause other national issues." claimed Mr. Bunhok.

Mr. Son Chhay, CNRP leader to the commission, said talks on voters' registration alone should not be held when the underlying problem is the CPP-dominated NEC. In response to the CNRP's requests, Mr. Bin Chin, leader of CPP delegates on the election reform commission, stated the talk on NEC shall be held at further stage since the primary focus of his party is to overhaul the voter registration and voter lists, and to enact the new law on political financing.

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Electoral reform talk on Monday 17th of March ended with an agreement to reform 14 key areas¹, 7 from the last CNRP's proposal and another 7 from the CPP. After the meeting, the following reform items were added:

- a new law on financing of political parties (already agreed in last talk)
- measures to ensure the neutrality of civil society organizations
- a review of independent election monitoring groups
- a revision of the electoral calendar
- a review of *electoral regulations* and *procedures*, including harsher punishments for infractions
- a law restricting the publication of voter opinion surveys



The latest short election reform talk floundered, while the appointment of NEC members remains the main controversial issue between the two parties. Therefore, both parties agreed on a prioritization on the 14 reform areas that shall be discussed in a National Workshop with the participation of civil society groups in the 3rd bipartisan commission meeting. However, no further details on the workshop have been released or mentioned. Opposition leader Sam Rainsy requested the ruling party to prepare their counterproposal for the NEC reform after CPP rejected a meeting between the leaders of the two parties. He also added that a mass demonstration would be held if the CPP has no



intention to reform the NEC. Rainsy told his supporters in a press conference at CNRP's head quarter that the opposition will organize a "people's congress" at the freedom park. But the government banned the planned gathering, so on Sunday 30th of March about 1.000 supporters made an unannounced march across Phnom Penh. Rainsy and his followers started at Wat Phnom to hold a ceremony to commemorate the 17th anniversary of a grenade attack on an opposition rally. The hour-long march ended at CNRP Headquarter, since the party was not allowed to enter the Freedom Park due to the ban. After the march, the CNRP started the planned open "people's congress", where Ho Vann, CNRP lawmaker-

elect presented a three-page "Resolution of the 2nd People's Congress". The document urges the opposition party not to take their seats in the NA until an independent investigation on last year's election takes place or a fresh election will be installed. Further on, it states that if the National Election Committee is not significantly reformed, the CNRP will "continue large scale non-violent demonstrations nationwide". On Tuesday, 1st of April Sam Rinsy announced that "from May 2 to May 17, CNRP will organize big demonstrations every day not only in Phnom Penh but throughout the country".

For in-depth reading:

1. <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/cnrp-03112014191707.html>
2. <http://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/cpp-cnrp-spar-over-mondays-electoral-reform-meeting-54256/>
3. <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/talks-03182014191159.html>
4. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cnrp-calls-top-level-meeting>

¹Key reform areas: 1. to improve voter registration and 2. voter lists; 3. to reform NEC and its local bodies; 4. to provide equitable media access; 5. to create mechanism to resolve electoral disputes; 6. to have direct village chiefs election; 7. to ensure the neutrality of civil servants and armed forces; 8. to draft a new law of financing political parties; 9. to ensure the neutrality of civil society organization; 10. to review election monitoring groups; 11. to revise electoral calendar; 12. to review electoral regulations and 13. procedures; 14. to draft a law restricting publication of voter opinion surveys.

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5. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/nec-reform-back-table>
6. <http://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/rainy-returns-from-abroad-threatens-demonstrations-again-54921/>
7. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/assembly-back-cnrp-not>
8. <http://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/cnrp-holds-first-mass-rally-since-protest-ban-55242/>

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