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PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2013 AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES IN CAMBODIA

Denis Schrey / Allan Tran-Sam / Stefanie Hartwig

On 28 July at 7:41 PM the Cambodian Minister of Information Khieu Kannarith announced on Facebook the preliminary election result of the 5th parliamentary election in Cambodia after the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991.¹ The Minister's announcement: "Cambodian People's Party (CPP): 68 seats, Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP): 55 seats, no change," came one hour after CNRP, the main opposition party, declared itself the winner of the national election, claiming 63 seats out of 120 for their own party.

The recent confirmation of the preliminary results by the National Election Committee (NEC) – viewed by the opposition, Civil Society Organisations and many voters as not independent – comes at a time where the opposition and the ruling party are struggling to agree on procedures for establishing a joint committee to look into pre-election and vote counting irregularities. The opposition party and the leading NGO election network accuse the National Election Committee as well as the Constitutional Council of being biased and influenced by the ruling party and not independent of fulfilling their role as an arbitrator on election complaints as long as their personal ties to the CPP are that close. Although the actual counting of votes seems to confirm the victory of the ruling party mass irregularities on voter's registrations, improperly sealed vote tallies as well as vote buying lead to a tampering of election results.

While the opposition continues to reject the announced results, the CPP mixes conciliatory with hard-line statements to respond to the opposition threats of mobilising

1 | On 23 Oct 1991, 19 governments gathered to sign, under UN Mandate, the Paris Peace Agreements which offered a comprehensive political settlement aimed at ending the tragic conflict and continuing bloodshed in Cambodia.

further mass demonstrations in case the CPP does not comply with their political demand for independent election investigation. Despite the current political deadlock, the time of Hun Sen's CPP dominating the political landscape in Cambodia for three decades seems to be history. The election result indicates a further consolidation of the Cambodian party system. Citizen's affiliation with former Royalist parties (FUNCINPEC and Nationalist Party) saw a further decline in what was once popular support. With two remaining political forces CPP and CNRP represented in the National Assembly, no party needs to build a coalition or compromise but can focus on their role as ruling and opposition party. In the Cambodian political context this might lead to further polarisation and confrontation in the political discourse. The increased popular support for the opposition signals the desire of citizens to have a strong and constructive challenger of government actions and policies. People's high expectations for a strong opposition party come at a time when the opposition party has been going through a merging process (Sam Rainsy Party and Human Rights Party joined forces and established in 2012 the Cambodian National Rescue Party) and where effective and sustainable opposition party structures at national and local levels have yet to be developed.

With two remaining political forces CPP and CNRP represented in the National Assembly, no party needs to build a coalition.

Table 1

Official Preliminary Result of Cambodian Parliamentary Elections 2013²

Political Party	President	Votes	allocation of seats	
			2008	2013
Nationalist Party (former Norodom Rannarith Party)	Seng Sokeng	37,963	2	0
FUNCINPEC Party	Prinzessin Norodom Aron Raksmeay	241,866	2	0
Republican Party	Sokroth Sokvanpanha Kseyla	34,569	-	0

2 | National Election Committee of Cambodia (NEC), "Official Preliminary Result of Cambodian Parliamentary Elections 2013", http://necelect.org.kh/nec_khmer/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1158&Itemid=348 (accessed 19 Aug 2013).

Political Party	President	Votes	allocation of seats	
			2008	2013
Cambodian People's Party (CPP)	Chea Sim	3,227,729	90	68
Khmer Party for Economic Development	Hourt Reachamren	19,871	–	0
Poverty Alleviation Party	Krovanch Daron	43,312	–	0
Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP)	Sam Rainsy	2,941,113	29	55
League for Democracy	Krom Veasna	69,667	–	0
Total		6,616,110	123	123

THE MARKS OF HISTORY IN A MODERNISING POLITICAL GAME³

The political context in which this year's general election took place is a reminder that the party system in Cambodia is strongly linked to the country's history. The political configuration inherited from the 2008 election initially included five political parties. Due to strategic merging, only three remained in the National Assembly at the end of the five-year term: the CPP, the FUNCINPEC, and the CNRP. Each of them has its roots in a specific situation in Cambodia's modern history.

According to its official stance the CPP is the successor of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP). This political party was founded in 1951 as the result of the dismemberment of the Vietnamese-based Indochina Communist Party into national parties. After the 1978 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia,⁴ KPRP became the only party in a

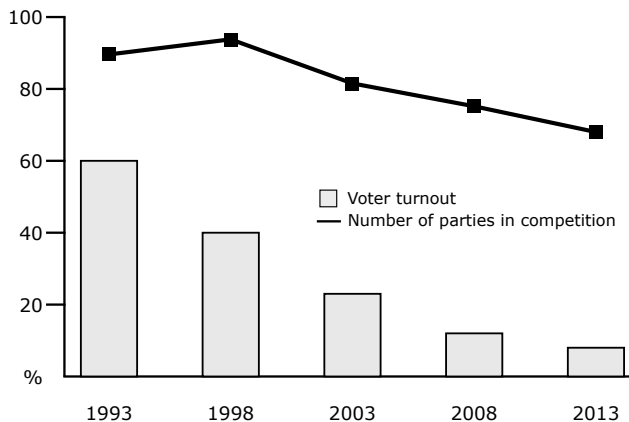
3 | The following remarks are partly inspired by interviews with representatives of each political party seating in the Parliament at the time. The interviews took place in September 2012 in Phnom Penh. Interviewees were Yos Phanita (CPP), Chea Se (FUNCINPEC), Ky Wandara (SRP), Long Kimkhorn (HRP), and Pen Sangha (NRP).

4 | During the Vietnam War (1955-1975), Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge Communists formed an alliance to fight the U.S.-backed regimes in their respective countries. The Khmer Rouge >

pro-soviet, one-party authoritarian system, founding its legitimacy on its defeat of the Khmer Rouge regime. In the 1990s the KPRP officially dropped its Marxist-Leninist ideology, orienting itself towards reformist socialism. In defiance of various changes of political systems, what became known as the CPP from 1991 on was able to establish itself as a solid entity in Cambodian political history. The CPP still bears the scars of its history. A strong hierarchy and meticulously organised structures are still main features of the organisation, partly explaining its efficacy. The elites' socialisation to Vietnamese socialism also explains the CPP's still solid inroads into the society, as well as its reticent posture with respect to participatory approaches and bottom up democratic mechanisms.⁵

Fig. 1

Voter turnout and number of political parties competing in the General elections since 1993 in Cambodia



Source: NEC, n. 2. 2013 turnout rate estimated according to preliminary results.

nevertheless quickly grew distrustful of their northern brothers, suspecting them of scheming to establish an Indochina federation under the influence of Vietnam. This situation led to increasing tension, and repeated small and medium-scale military incursions from both sides. By 1978, the political negotiations between the two partners had reached a deadlock. The Vietnamese leaders finally decided to remove the Khmer Rouge regime, invading Cambodia on 25 Dec 1978. Their troops reached Phnom Penh in just two weeks, and were to stay in the country for the following decade, effectively putting an end to the four-year rule of the Khmer Rouge. A pro-Vietnamese government was installed, in a system that remained that of a single-party regime – revolving around the KPRP.

The FUNCINPEC party was officially formed as a political party from abroad in 1981, as a tentative to offer an alternative resistance against the Vietnamese.

The FUNCINPEC party was founded by and around the prominent figure of King Sihanouk, the father of the nation who obtained Cambodia's independence from the French

without a drop of blood. The party's legitimacy derived from Sihanouk's aura and prestige, and was related to the end of colonialism and Royalty. It was officially formed as a political party from abroad in 1981, as a tentative offer to an alternative resistance to the Vietnamese.⁶ The FUNCINPEC's popularity never ceased decreasing throughout Cambodia's recent history, going from winning the first democratic election in 1993⁷ to not being able to secure a seat this year in the National Assembly. The party has had difficulties becoming more than "the King's party" and creating a clear political identity with a distinct programme. Its regular alignment to the CPP, with which it shared power in a coalition from 1993 until this year's ballot, also made it hard for voters to clearly identify the FUNCINPEC's line. The retirement of King Sihanouk in 2004 and his death in 2012 weakened the party's identity even more, along with several dissidences. The most recent of them led to the creation of the Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP) in 2006,

- 5 | For more details, see: David Roberts, "From 'Communism' to 'Democracy' in Cambodia: a Decade of Transition and Beyond", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 36, 2003, 245-258.
- 6 | Only two organisations were able to oppose the pro-Vietnamese government set-up following the 1978 invasion of Cambodia: the Khmer Rouge, which the Vietnamese had just ousted from power but yet remained active, and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). The latter, created in 1979 with the support of Thailand, was an attempt to build up a non-communist resistance to the Vietnamese military occupation of Cambodia. It demanded immediate ceasefire and the establishment of a democratically elected government.
- 7 | The Vietnamese armed forces, under increasing pressure from the international community, started their withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989. In the same year, the First Paris Peace Conference on Cambodia was held to find a solution regarding the future of the country. This led to the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, signed by the factions of the Cambodian Supreme National Council, Vietnam, and the fifteen countries that participated in the Paris Peace Conference. The Agreement included the establishment of a United Nation Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) to monitor Cambodia's transition towards democracy. A new Cambodian Constitution was adopted in 1993, which legally transformed Cambodia into a modern Constitutional Monarchy with a parliamentary system. The first democratic general election was held in 1993.

on account of a conflict between Prince Norodom and the FUNCINPEC's secretary general. As a result, the royalist vote in Cambodia became more divided and more confused, as NRP's platform was hard to differentiate from the FUNCINPEC's or, to a certain extent, the CPP's.⁸

The endeavour did not last and, following the Prince's retirement from politics in 2012, the party was renamed Nationalist Party. Later on, its merging with FUNCINPEC was decided. The two other parties that secured seats in the National Assembly in the 2008 General election are the SRP and the HRP.⁹ In 1995, FUNCINPEC dissident and fierce critic of the government Sam Rainsy founded the Khmer Nation Party, later re-named Sam Rainsy Party (SRP). In 2003, Kem Sokha, also a former FUNCINPEC member, set up the NGO Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR) with the objective of creating a public forum to advance human rights. After being temporarily detained for defamation, and supported by a 200,000 strong thumbprint petition, Kem Sokha turned his Centre into the political party HRP in 2007. These two parties SRP and HRP are younger, and rooted in a different period of the history of Cambodia. Contrary to the CPP and FUNCINPEC, they were created in the context of a multi-party system legally established by the constitution of 1993. This impacts directly the two parties' nature and objectives. Firstly, they lack the strong historical identity the CPP and the FUNCINPEC enjoy. Secondly, they had to compete from the beginning with the already strong and experienced CPP and FUNCINPEC.

In preparation for this year's ballot, the two parties merged in 2012 under the CNRP's electoral banner, thereby creating a credible opposition force. This made possible the stunning results it obtained in the 2013 election compared to the opposition parties' cumulative scores the previous years. Yet the CNRP's platform remains relatively weak.¹⁰

8 | The NRP and FUNCINPEC both won two seats in the 2008 General election, receiving respectively 5.62 per cent and 5.05 per cent of the votes.

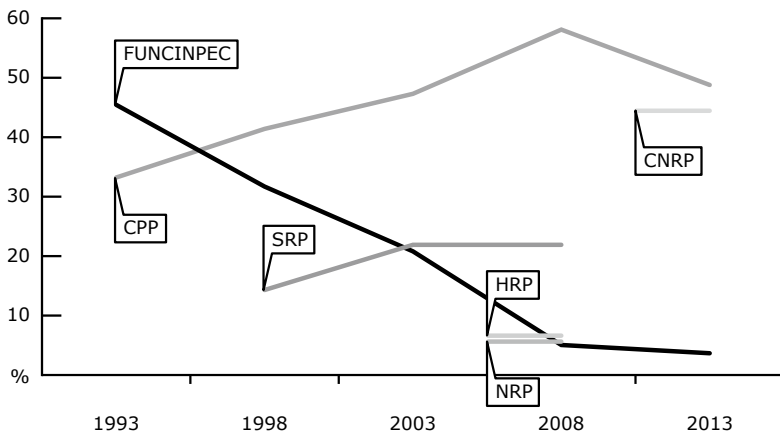
9 | They respectively secured 26 and three seats.

10 | In the interviews conducted in September 2012 by Stefanie Hartwig, none of the interviewees was able to give a clear answer when asked to define their party's ideology; as exemplified by Long Kimkhorn (HRP) who stated: "We start with social democrat; if one day the party becomes stronger, we move to liberal democrat."

The party picks out issues that are usually found among traditional NGO-topics, such as rule of law, human rights, land grabbing and labour migration. Furthermore, there are the social problem of labour migration, the poor working conditions and insufficient workers' rights in the garment industry. These contentious social issues manage to obtain media coverage and to polarise the population, but the party falls short of offering a comprehensive and sufficiently developed political platform.

Fig. 2

Percentage of vote received by the main parties during General elections since 1993



Source: NEC, n. 2. Data for the 2013 general election are calculated according to the preliminary.

The tendency of personalisation of the party, such as found in the CPP with Hun Sen's almost thirty-year rule or in the FUNCINPEC around the royal family, is also sometimes unfortunately recurrent.¹¹ Owing to its long history, the CPP outplays its opponents in membership numbers and organisational structure at all administrative levels.¹²

In the past, many scholars have brought forward the structural elements favouring the CPP: a rule of law slowly but surely establishing itself, great control over the media,

11 | As Ky Wandara (SRP) put it in an interview in September 2012: "[The] person makes [the] party."

12 | See for instance: Sorpong Peou, "The Cambodian Challenge for Party and Party System Institutionalisation", preliminary draft.

and a lack of legal framework leaving party financing unregulated.¹³ These arguments have been regularly used to explain the CPP's electoral victories and dominance of political life. Although they cannot explain the results of this year's election. Other elements must be taken into account.



Voters in a polling station: In a study more than half of the respondents expressed they were feeling better off than five years ago. | Source: © Mak Remissa, picture alliance / dpa.

WELCOMED CONTINUOUS ECONOMIC GROWTH

Support to the CPP cannot exclusively be attributed to a lack of serious political contenders. Nor can it be assumed that this support rests on the sole historical prestige attached to the party, or on somewhat of a personality cult initiated by Hun Sen. The Prime Minister's majority can count on a record of improvements widely perceived by the population as successes of the CPP. Above all stands

13 | See for instance: Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2002, 51-65; Kheang Un, "Patronage Politics and Hybrid Democracy: Political Change in Cambodia, 1993-2003", *Asian Perspective* 29, 2005, 203-230; David Chandler, "Plus C'est la Même Chose", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2010, 228-234; Kheang Un, "Cambodia: Moving Away from Democracy?", *International Political Science Review* 32, 2011, 546-562.

continuous economic growth,¹⁴ does not go unnoticed by the voters. In a study conducted from 12 January to 2 February 2013, more than half the respondents expressed they were feeling better off compared to five years ago¹⁵ and, for the seventh year in a row, about 80 per cent of the people thought the country was headed in the right direction. Considering the CPP has been in power alone or in a coalition since the first democratic elections of 1993, giving them credit – if only partly – for such improvements seems only fair.

The state of war and the Khmer Rouges effectively destroyed almost all infrastructures and institutions in the country. Following their overthrow, Cambodia became, an important recipient of foreign aid.

This impressive economic growth can be explained by several factors. Firstly, Cambodia has traveled a long road. The state of war and the Khmer Rouges effectively destroyed almost all infrastructures and institutions in the country. Their rule, from 1975 to 1979, caused the disappearance of virtually everything from market economy to hospitals, from schools to pagodas. Following their overthrow, Cambodia became, and is still today, an important recipient of foreign aid. In an article published in May 2013, Voice of America reported that the country received a total of up to ten billion U.S. dollars in foreign aid during the period 1993 to 2012.¹⁶ Moreover, this aid has constantly prioritised the health and infrastructure sectors over the years,¹⁷ translating into direct and concrete daily-life improvement for the Cambodians¹⁸

14 | The World Bank reports Cambodia's economy grew at a rate of roughly 10 per cent during the period 1998-2008, followed by a slight decrease in the context of the 2008/2009 global downturn, with a constant four year 7.1 per cent; a 6.7 per cent annual growth is meanwhile expected in 2013, and a 7.0 per cent one in 2014. See: The World Bank, "Cambodia Overview", <http://worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/overview> (accessed 27 Jul 2013).

15 | The International Republican Institute (IRI), "Survey of Cambodian Public Opinion", <http://iri.org/sites/default/files/Cambodian%20Poll%209%20Final%20PUBLIC.pdf> (accessed 27 Jul 2013).

16 | Theara Khoun, "As Foreign Aid Increases, Questions about Conditions", *Voice of America*, 21 May 2013, <http://voa.cambodia.com/content/as-foreign-aid-increases-questions-about-conditions/1664821.html> (accessed 27 Jul 2013).

17 | Ibid.

18 | The above-mentioned survey conducted by the International Republican Institute found that people thought the two issues having the greatest impact on their family lives were health and sanitation (23 per cent), and jobs (17 per cent). That is to say health and the economy.

and at the same time contributing to long-term economic growth (through investment in infrastructure and education for instance). Nevertheless, the net official development assistance and official aid received by the kingdom make up for a smaller part of its gross national income every year, decreasing to 6.5 per cent in 2011 with 792 million U.S. dollars, compared to about eleven per cent ten years before, with 420 million U.S. dollars.

Secondly, as these numbers also demonstrate, foreign aid and assistance, albeit non-negligible, do not constitute the whole of the Cambodian economy. Industry (in particular the garment industry) is thriving in the country, encouraged by labour intensive methods, some of the lowest wages in the region and duty-free access to the European market. All in all, industry is expected to register a ten per cent annual growth rate in 2013,¹⁹ mostly through exports, which accounted for 54 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011.²⁰ What's more, these favourable conditions, along with political stability and pro-investors policies by the government²¹ have succeeded in creating a climate of trust and business attractiveness: Foreign direct investments showed a skyrocketing 73 per cent annual growth in 2012, with close to 1.6 billion U.S. dollars invested in Cambodia, or approximately seven per cent of its GDP. 23 per cent of these investments are from China, and a majority of the rest from ASEAN countries. The share of investments made from ASEAN countries is growing every year and bound to be more and more important as greater communication and strategic planning by the ASEAN facilitate investments plans. Finally, tourism and real estate make up a significant part of the Cambodian economy as well. Tourism is expected to grow seven per cent in 2013, and could even score better if the trend

19 | The Asian Development Bank, "Outlook 2013", <http://adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2013/ado2013.pdf> (accessed 6 Aug 2013).

20 | The World Bank, "Data Cambodia", <http://data.worldbank.org/country/cambodia> (accessed 11 Sep 2013).

21 | For instance the creation from 2005 on of 20 Special Economic Zones in strategic places such as the Thai or Vietnamese borders.

of the first half of the year will be confirmed in the second one,²² while real estate is booming thanks to urbanisation.

Thus, the Cambodian economy presents strong assets and shows better results every year. In the long run, the question of aid dependency should nevertheless be addressed. Foreign aid and assistance can provide Cambodia with transitional help towards securing long-term growth. But it will not last forever,²³ and the objective of long-term growth will not be reached without strong Cambodian commitment to the modernisation of the economy. International aid should be invested wisely to foster broad-based development, while efforts should be made to diversify the economy. Cambodia's GDP is still comparatively low, and needs to be strengthened. The challenge for the Cambodian economy lies in going beyond the stages of production and transformation of raw materials. The inclusion of skilled workers and research and development activities is crucial for a sustainable economy. The Cambodian economy has already been diversified, slowly but surely. It needs to continue on this path and fully realise its transition.

CPP, THE CUSTODIAN OF SOCIAL PEACE?

A second argument CPP followers regularly bring forward in support of their party is the closely related social stability and social peace it has been able to maintain in the country, going so far as to threaten civil war if the opposition won the election. After the tumultuous and bloody recent history of Cambodia, it is understandable that people want to preserve stability. And as a matter of fact, since 1999, when royalists' and Hun Sen's supporters fought in the streets after Hun Sen deposed his co-Premier in a coup, the country has been at peace. This argument is frequently used in the CPP's propaganda, and it seems to be largely heard.

22 | Hor Kimsay, "Tourism figures rise in the first five months", *The Phnom Penh Post*, 11 Jul 2013, <http://phnompenhpost.com/business/tourism-figures-rise-first-five-months> (accessed 19 Aug 2013).

23 | The most recent example of foreign aid being put into question comes from the American Lower House and Senate. See: Kevin Ponniah and Cheang Sokha, "Democracy scrutinised", *The Phnom Penh Post*, 11 Jul 2013, <http://phnompenhpost.com/national/democracy-scrutinised> (accessed 19 Aug 2013).

When discussing social stability in Cambodia, it is nevertheless important not to forget where it comes from and what it is based on. Only through the understanding of the post-Khmer Rouges context, in which the system is rooted, can one comprehend how and why it was accepted and has been able to persist since then. The greatest threat after the Vietnamese “liberation” of the Cambodians in 1979 was social instability. Left only with the ruins of what used to be a society, everything had to be reconstructed. The strategy adopted to address this issue as rapidly as possible was national reconciliation: the majority of former Khmer Rouges Cadres were reintegrated into society, and participated in the national effort of reconstruction. In a society where no institution existed and where a democratic culture was absent, one fast and efficient way to realise this was to rally to the cause those people who had the power to mobilise the necessary resources, providing them with personal incentives and ensuring their loyalty through personal bonds.

Following a strategy of reconciliation, the majority of former Khmer Rouges Cadres were reintegrated into society, and participated in the effort of reconstruction.

Hun Sen was a central actor of this strategy; first as Deputy Prime Minister in the government installed by the Vietnamese after 1979, then as the Prime Minister, he has been maintaining his rule since 1985 through an effective centralisation of power. He has gathered into his hands the strings controlling a complex system of patronage, alliances, and clannish interests. By appointing the right people in the administration and for example the army, he has created a long series of loyalties;²⁴ these two institutions are now largely known as answering to him and his party. Numerous are the articles detailing the chains of influence that run throughout Cambodia’s elites.²⁵ A significant proportion of Cambodians are not happy with this state of

24 | For example, the Cambodian military counted more than 2,000 generals in 2010, compared to less than 500 for all of the American armed forces – the largest military apparatus in the world. See: Khy Sovuthy, “More Military Promotions for Relatives of CPP Top Brass”, *The Cambodia Daily*, 7 Aug 2013, <http://cambodiadaily.com/archive/more-military-promotions-for-relatives-of-cpp%E2%80%88top-brass-38540> (accessed 19 Aug 2013).

25 | See for instance Julia Wallace, “The Fresh Princes of Phnom Penh”, *IHT Global Opinion*, 3 May 2013, <http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/prime-minister-hun-sens-dynasty-over-cambodia> (accessed 28 Jul 2013).

affairs; and it is likely that this tendency will increase in the future, as more and more deserving graduates flood the market, looking for the good standards of living they have invested so much time and money for. Seeing how good jobs or business opportunities are being given to others based on their personal relationships will instead only create frustration and resentment; two sentiments that hardly lie at the core of social stability.

As the country modernises itself, a ruling method based on patronage and bribery might be decreasingly tolerated by the people – even if it ensures social stability.

The CPP's social order as it is walks on two Achilles' heels. It is based on a system that may have proved efficient following the fall of the Khmer Rouges, but that might not be the most adequate and democratically satisfying in the current situation. It is not certain how long such a system can last without alienating an increasing proportion of the population. The ten main reasons given by people refusing to endorse the government's action already all revolve around human rights violations, corruption, and environmental and economic concerns.²⁶ As the country modernises itself, a ruling method based on patronage and bribery becomes less and less adequate and might be decreasingly tolerated by the people – even if it ensures social stability. The matter of whether the citizenry will still continue to put up with it comes down to how much they will be willing to sacrifice for social stability, and for how long.

A GENERAL LACK OF INDEPENDENT INFORMATION

The CPP also benefits from the fact that Cambodians remain largely rural and unevenly informed. Their preoccupations regard primarily having a piece of land and the essential necessities to live. In 2009, one third of the population was still living on less than 0.60 U.S. dollars a day.²⁷ The World Food Programme found in 2010 that a percentage as high

26 | Namely: increasing corruption (24 per cent), illegal immigration (17 per cent), nepotism (17 per cent), damage to environment/forest/fisheries (15 per cent), low crop prices for farmers (15 per cent), land grabbing (14 per cent), poverty (12 per cent), prices of food are too high (not including gas and energy costs) (12 per cent), Gas/energy prices are too high (11 per cent), and not enough jobs (9 per cent). IRI, n. 15.

27 | The World Bank, "Improved Energy Technology for rural Cambodia", <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTTEAPASTAE/Resources/ASTAE-IMPROVED-ENERGY-TECHNOLOGIES-Cambodia.pdf> (accessed 27 Jul 2013).

as 40 per cent of the children still suffered malnourishment in Cambodia.²⁸ In this respect, individuals located in rural areas are naturally more vulnerable. Yet, according to the World Bank, a little less than 80 per cent of the population of Cambodia still live in rural areas.²⁹ In such conditions, people's attention remains largely focused on the primary means of subsistence. Concerns about political connivance at the national level can seem a distant matter, and pressuring the government on these issues too costly to be obtainable.

Additionally, the penetration of information is questionable inside the Kingdom in general, and even more in its countryside. The primary sources of information in Cambodia remain television (83 per cent) and radio (79 per cent).³⁰ Most viewed channels turn out to be government-owned or pro-CPP stations.³¹ Keeping in mind that only seven per cent of the people polled report using the Internet,³² where independent analysis and data can be found, the majority of people receive a mostly one-sided, pro-governmental point of view.³³ All evidences seem to indicate that these figures are higher in the rural areas, where one in two people do not even possess a phone,³⁴ and are largely dependent on the mainstream government-influenced media. A general lack of independent sources of information, coupled with a serious gap between the mostly rural Cambodia and its urban dwellers in terms of income, quality of life, and primary concerns, certainly gave an advantage to the CPP.

28 | The World Food Programme, "Cambodia", <http://wfp.org/countries/cambodia/overview> (accessed 28 Jul 2013).

29 | The World Bank, n. 20.

30 | IRI, n. 15.

31 | Ibid.

32 | Ibid.

33 | For instance, the return of self-exiled opposition leader Sam Rainsy received virtually no coverage in the majority of media, despite having drawn a 100,000 person strong crowd to the streets. See: Kuch Naren, "Pro-Government Media Blank on Rainsy's Return", *The Cambodia Daily*, 20 Jul 2013, <http://cambodiadaily.com/elections/pro-government-media-blank-on-rainsys-return-35839> (accessed 19 Aug 2013).

34 | Ibid.

YOUTHS: FRESH TROOPS OR CHALLENGERS?

Representing a growing proportion of the population, youths have different expectations in life than elderly people. This year's electorate in Cambodia has been the youngest of all, with 3.5 million voters aged between 18 and 30, and half of them voting for the first time. Better educated than their parents' generation,³⁵ and having greater familiarity with new technologies and social media, they are more likely to have the tools to question the government's policies and ask for more details and precise statistics about its actions. As the Internet market grows, it also provides more room for the opposition to express itself.³⁶ With limited access to mainstream media and a platform particularly attractive to youths (promising education of greater quality, an improved vocational training system, and real professional opportunities for their future), the CNRP is now strongly present on social media websites, which represent a core element of the party's communication strategy.

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Nevertheless, the consequences of this demographic change in this year's election are not to be overstated. Firstly, no poll or survey can adequately quantify the youths' support to the opposition party. It is only informed speculation. What's more, the divisions that prevail within Cambodian society in general are not foreign to its younger components. Difference in the family social background, wealth, and education are also among the factors impacting a young voter's decisions; a citizen's age is not enough to determine his political choice. Besides, as of 2013, Cambodians aged 18 to 24 were two and a half times more likely not to have any identification documents than people aged 25 and older.³⁷ When asked whether they intended to cast a ballot at the general election, they also were the least "very likely to vote" group of all those polled, while making up the majority of the respondents "not likely" or

35 | Ibid.

36 | Sophat Soeung, "Social Media's Growing Influence on Cambodian Politics", *Asia Pacific Bulletin* 222, East-West Center, 23 Jul 2013, http://eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb_222.pdf (accessed 29 Jul 2013).

37 | IRI, n. 15.

“somewhat unlikely” to go to the polls.³⁸ The influence of these young voters in the election is therefore difficult to assess and is particularly complex. But youths are nonetheless bound to hold weight more and more in Cambodia’s political life, which could turn out to be a decisive advantage for the opposition, as its platform seems to address their main concerns more than the current CPP programme.

THE LAND-TITLING CAMPAIGN: A DOUBLE-EDGED MEASURE FOR THE GOVERNMENT

This being said, the CNRP was able to rely on other assets to score in this election than just Internet users. The security of the voter’s land, still often their only source of subsistence, is a cardinal need for a majority of Cambodians. Hoping to take advantage of this, the CPP launched – amid great fanfare – an ambitious land-titling programme in June 2012. Three million land titles are said to have already been distributed, giving many people reasons to support the CPP. Unfortunately for the ruling party, this scheme created a lot of discontentment as well. Many have decried the conditions under which it was conducted, from defrauded residents to international organisations. The World Bank, initially supporting the programme, later froze its funding of new projects in Cambodia over the government’s failure to comply with the organisation’s requirements.³⁹ A serious subject of criticism also resides in the number of surprisingly long-term land concessions granted to foreign investors every year, and which often exceed the maximum limit in size of 10,000 ha stipulated in the law. These concessions, which sometimes bear grave human, economical, and environmental costs, are made in the dark and therefore raise many questions, highlighting a lack of explanation as to why such concessions are in the nation’s interest, and a lack of public consultation altogether.

The situation appears even worse as the government’s communication regarding the land-titling campaign itself is nothing short of insufficient and little data and statistics

38 | Ibid.

39 | See for instance: “Cambodia: Land Titling Campaign Open to Abuse”, *Human Rights Watch*, 12 Jun 2013, <http://hrw.org/news/2013/06/12/cambodia-land-titling-campaign-open-abuse> (accessed 29 Jul 2013).

are being released. This points the spotlight solely at human rights NGOs and international organisations. As a result, human rights abuses, corruption, and mishandling of some land title and concession attributions receive large coverage while successes of the campaign are kept out of sight. The absence of transparency in the attribution of titles as well as a general lack of communication, unabashed use of violence, and wide-spread bribery have deceived many people who turned their back on the CPP in this year's ballot.⁴⁰



Cambodian People's Party's supporters: After the tumultuous and bloody recent history of Cambodia, it is only understandable that people want to preserve stability. | Source: © Mak Remissa, picture alliance / dpa.

CORRUPTION, POPULISM AND THE CNRP

Rampant corruption in Cambodia is still an issue, encouraged by a lack of information and data about the country's situation and the actions of the government. This might also have strengthened the support that Sam Rainsy, "Mr. Clean", received on 28 July. In its Global Corruption Barometer 2013, Transparency International reports that Cambodia is the most corrupt country in Southeast Asia, far ahead of the second in line.⁴¹ And indeed, corruption in Cambodia has a long history. It has been part of the country's political life at least since its independence. It is

40 | Ibid.

41 | Transparency International, "Global Corruption Barometer 2013. Cambodia", <http://transparency.org/gcb2013/country/?country=cambodia> (accessed 30 Jul 2013).

therefore not an attribute to the CPP in particular. Nevertheless, having based his successive campaigns since the time of the Sam Rainsy Party on the eradication of corruption and a state morally beyond reproach, the leader of the opposition probably enticed many disenchanting citizens – although corruption might not necessarily be absent from his party either. Still, Rainsy appeared as the alternative to corruption, as more and more Cambodians consider bribery an unnecessary nuisance. In Southeast Asia, Cambodia offers, after Malaysia, the highest rate of people willing to report such practices (77 per cent),⁴² thereby demonstrating it is not accepted as a normal practice. In the last run-up to the elections, interviews of corruption-weary citizens were numerous in the newspapers, arguing they would voice their discontent in that regard by voting for the CNRP this time.

Estimations of the sway these voters held in the outcome of the election should however not be exaggerated. Deploring the omnipresence of corruption in the country does not necessarily mean joining the opposition: 57 per cent of those polled by Transparency International deemed the government's action in the fight against corruption "effective".⁴³ Such a trend, explains Transparency International, is a common feature in the first years a government launches a campaign against bribery. The Anti-Corruption Unit, presented as a major step in the fight against corruption, was launched in 2010 with great pomp; its efficacy has nevertheless since then proven constrained by government control and serious under-funding.

Finally, another element that might have played in favour of the CNRP during this election is Sam Rainsy's anti-Vietnamese rhetoric, blaming the Vietnamese in his speeches for about everything from the unemployment rate to Hun Sen's successive election victories. "All compatriots, if we don't rescue our nation, in four or five years more Cambodia will be full of Vietnamese", with declarations such as this Sam Rainsy may have rallied some to his cause.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, playing the anti-Vietnamese card also has

42 | Ibid.

43 | Ibid.

44 | Cheang Sokha, "Return sparks CNRP", *The Phnom Penh Post*, 22 Jul 2013, <http://phnompenhpost.com/national/return-sparks-cnrp> (accessed 19 Aug 2013).

its risks and downsides. Namely, antagonising the ethnic-Vietnamese Cambodian voters and the Vietnamese nationals living in Cambodia, as well as keeping at bay people who reject populism and racism.



Sam Rainsy: "Mister Clean" appeared to be the alternative to corruption. | Source: Bart Geesink, flickr ©①②.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

The election result itself and the active youth involvement are indeed encouraging. Both aspects speak in favour of an evolving democratic process and culture in Cambodia. However, they cannot hide systemic weaknesses of the political system and political parties which become apparent when citizens expect results and not mere promises.

The Cambodian People Party when analysing the outcome of the election and its current hierarchical structures will most likely come to the conclusion that it, up to now, did not create a real democratic internal decision making process. It will also have to question its way of influencing voters' decisions. The election has shown that vote buying might still work in rural areas and in CPP strongholds, yet the rapid urbanisation and growing number of more educated youth voters will challenge and reject such practices in future elections. The next five years will show whether the strong top down management approach of the party will be challenged by the new party generation and those party members who are disappointed by the current structures. A more decentralised decision making would allow for real participation of different groups in

developing policies and shaping the CPP's position towards much needed substantial institutional reforms, such as the strengthening of the legislative branches (currently being a rubber stamp of government drafted laws), the reform of the internal procedures of the National Assembly to allow opposition parties to properly exercise their mandate as well as the reform of the management structure of the National Election Committee, which is currently controlled by the CPP. Reforms are also needed in the economic field, where competition legislation is still to be implemented, in the media sector, which is still under strong state supervision, and in the field of decentralisation, as current local, political, financial and economic self-governance needs further implementation.

The CNRP and their charismatic leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha will now have to prove they can work together and lead the party's opposition work. With the return of Sam Rainsy one week before the election, there was strong momentum for the opposition to gain people's trust in their capability to form a future government. This momentum could be maintained if the party demonstrates over the next years that it can become a credible political opposition force. One of the key challenges will be to broaden the scope of their programmatic work to gain expertise in various important policy areas such as economic policy, foreign relations and regional cooperation as well as energy and environmental policies. The election result mirrors the voter's expectation that the opposition plays a strong but constructive role in challenging and monitoring the government's policies in key reform areas.

The election results in 2018 will show which party better responded to the needs and expectations of the voters. Both parties have to work hard to regain (CPP) and keep (CNRP) the trust lost and won in these elections.