

## CAMBODIA

MARTINA MAYR  
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### Cambodian People's Party Congress

Cambodia's Ruling Party to assess Weaknesses and Strengths

**The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) held a 3-day Congress from 30th January until 1st February 2015 in Phnom Penh, intending to enhance the party's internal organization and reputation prior to the 2017 local and 2018 national elections.**

The for the CPP unexpected result of the 2013 national elections, which left the party with only a slight majority of 68 out of 123 seats in the National Assembly after an undefeated 30-year long holding of power, and the upcoming elections in 2017 and 2018 have stimulated internal discussions on improvements and alterations within the party<sup>1</sup>. In this respect, for the first time after the announcement of the 2013 election results did the CPP organize a party congress to address, among more than 1,300 members of its party, current internal and external affairs to prepare for the upcoming elections<sup>2</sup>.

The CPP self-critically admitted structural weaknesses and corruption within the party, which led to a major loss in popularity<sup>3</sup>. According to an internal self-evaluation report distributed to CPP members during the congress, among the main reasons losing the trust of many voters were<sup>4</sup>:

- Failure to implement policies and the law
- Misconduct within its own ranks, including corruption, nepotism and abuse of power

- Lack of communication between different levels of authorities
- Rising income disparities between the rich and the poor
- Unaddressed border, immigration, land and deforestation issues

While during the congress, party members evaluated the reasons for their 22-votes loss and the increased popularity of its main opposition, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), H.E. Heng Samrin, Honorary President of the CPP and President of the National Assembly, called for "timely and effective reforms" to counteract the party's steadily decreasing reputation<sup>5</sup>.

The focus on implementing reforms and learning from experiences, were exemplified by H.E. Khieu Kanharith, Minister of Information and Party Spokesperson, suggesting salary raises for civil servants and garment workers but also the recruitment and promotion of the Youth into responsible party and government positions<sup>6</sup>.

Another main focus of the congress was the addition of 306 new members to the CPP's central committee to assure the representation of different generations in the upper ranks of the party<sup>7</sup>. Such influx resulted in now 545 members, of which 70 represent new members under the age of 50. A necessary change as, according to H.E. Khieu Kanharith, more than 50 percent of Cambodians are under the age of 30<sup>8</sup>. Among the new recruitments are also Prime Minister Hun Sen's 3 sons, 45 women and several

1 The Cambodia Daily, 31st January-1st February 2015  
2 Khmer Times, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2015; The Phnom Penh Post, 31st January 2015  
3 The Cambodia Daily, 31st January-1st February 2015  
4 Voice of America, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2015; The Cambodia Daily, 31st January-1st February 2015

5 The Cambodia Daily, 31st January-1st February 2015  
6 The Cambodia Daily, 2nd February 2015  
7 Voice of America, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2015  
8 Reuters, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015

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high-end military and police officials such as Chhay Sinarith, Head of the Internal Security Department of the Ministry of Interior, Chuon Sovann, Phnom Penh Police Chief and Rath Srieng, Phnom Penh Military Police Commander. The 34 member strong standing committee (politburo) has not been modified however<sup>9</sup>.

#### Evaluation and Prospects

Many critics, among them H.E. Sam Rainsy, President of the CNRP, doubt the CPP's ability to counteract its decades' long internal system marked by corruption and nepotism<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, independent political observer Kem Ley announced his doubt whether the CPP could fundamentally change in order to succeed in the upcoming elections<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, the party's development towards accountable procedures has been rather slow and up until now, has shown little improvements. The congress, which honestly addressed widespread internal weaknesses, could potentially act as a milestone towards more accountability and transparency yet, whether changes are truly to be implemented remain to be seen.

The addition of more than double its previous members to the central committee to attract young voters likely derived from the opposition's high number of youth votes, which have been increasingly drawn towards political participation within the past couple of years. Yet, as many of the younger members added to the central committee are related to the top members of the CPP, it remains questionable whether there will be new initiatives and willingness by the older generations to respect and support new ideas.

Sparking controversy is also the involvement of high-end officials' relatives as well as military and police representatives. Critics expressed their concern of a further tightening link between politics and the mili-

tary, a condition that has been seriously contested even prior to the congress<sup>12</sup>.

By and large the enlargement of the central committee does not necessarily guarantee alterations of internal procedures nor does it assure more transparency and accountability of the party. Nevertheless such a ballooning of members potentially increases loyalty of new members to the party and the party leaders.

The CPP will now have to prove that the younger generation are allowed to develop a stronger corrective voice and to take over more responsible positions within the party. A highly centralized organization based only on loyalty mechanisms might discourage younger people with high potential to engage in the party.

The governing CPP has the chance to deepen the reforms of the state and the economy before the next local and national elections. It has to act firm and without hesitation and prove that it is capable to fight corruption at all levels, reform the judiciary, the media as well as to foster decentralization and further improve the ever so important education and health system. The positive data on economic development and poverty alleviation should encourage the party to regain the trust of those who voted for the opposition in 2013.

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9 The Phnom Penh Post, 2nd February 2015

10 The Cambodia Daily, 31st January 2015

11 The Cambodia Daily, 2nd February 2015

12 The Cambodia Daily, 2nd February 2015

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