

## CAMBODIA

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# National Elections in Cambodia

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Hun Sen remains Prime Minister

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The picture shows the Cambodian National Assembly.

**On 29 July, Cambodia held elections for its sixth National Assembly (NA). According to preliminary election results, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) claims to have beaten all its rivals by winning every seat in Parliament and securing Hun Sen as Prime Minister. With this result, Prime Minister Hun Sen has extended his 33-year term in office with the best election result by the CPP since the first democratic elections were held in 1993. Prime Minister Hun Sen thus remains the world's longest-serving Head of government. The election outcome was not entirely surprising given that the largest opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), had been dissolved under dubious accusations by the Supreme Court in 2017. With the de facto abolition of critical media, the CPP's significant competitive advantage in the election campaign and political pressure against the opposition and voters, there can be no talk of free and fair elections. This country report presents the political situation prior to the elections as well as the election outcome and analyzes the election's implications for the future development of Cambodia.**

With the dissolution of the largest opposition party CNRP in November last year, an election victory of the CPP was impending. Nevertheless, the election day was expected with great anticipation as it remained un-

clear how the smaller opposition parties would fare and also how high the voter turnout would be. A high electoral turnout was critical for the CPP in order to indicate strong legitimization of the government by the voters. Since the official election result will only be announced by the National Electoral Commission on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, the only sources available so far are statements by political parties and reports of both national and international journalists. From a democratic perspective, the as yet unconfirmed election results seem sobering. None of the 19 opposition parties managed to win over a relevant share of voters. The CPP announced its victory of all 125 seats in Parliament on the day after the elections without waiting for the release of the official results. With voter turnout at 82.89 percent, this turnout was higher than in the 2013 elections (69.61 percent).

However, the number of registered voters decreased. Compared to 2013, 1.3 million fewer voters were registered in this year's elections and this translates to a total of 200,000 fewer voters who cast their votes. Thus, despite an increase in Cambodia's population, fewer voters have participated in this election compared to the last. In contrast, each of the previous five elections to the National Assembly saw a steady increase in the number of registered voters. In the 2018 elections, the decline in voter registration was particularly noticeable in former CNRP strongholds. It may be argued that the low registration numbers represent

a form of political protest. Similarly, the submission of spoilt ballot papers may also be considered a form of political protest. After casting their vote, Cambodian voters have their finger marked with indelible ink that remains for up to one week. Many voters feared repercussions where they to abstain from voting – an act clearly evident from the lack of the ink stain. These fears are rooted in threats made by the government. This is one reason why 587,137 voters spoilt their ballot (8.57 percent)<sup>1</sup>. Remarkably, the number of spoilt ballots is higher than the number of votes for the largest opposition party. According to the Phnom Penh Post, the CPP won 76.78 percent of the vote. The Royalist FUNCINPEC (*National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia*) emerged as the second strongest party with 5.88 percent of the vote but could not win a single seat<sup>2</sup>.

	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013	2018
<b>Registered voters</b>	4.764.430	5.395.595	6.341.834	8.125.529	9.675.453	8.380.217
<b>Election turnout</b>	89,56%	93,74%	83,22%	75,21%	69,61%	82,17%
<b>Number of seats</b>	120	122	123	123	123	125
<b>Number of political parties in NA</b>	4	3	3	5	2	1
<b>CPP share</b>	51	64	73	90	68	125
<b>Share of the largest opposition parties</b>	FUN-CINPEC Partei: 58	FUN-CINPEC Partei: 43 Sam Rainsy Partei: 15	FUN-CINPEC Partei: 26 Sam Rainsy Partei: 24	Sam Rainsy Partei: 26	KNRP: 55	-
<b>Number of women in NA</b>	5,58%	12,3%	19,51%	21,1%	20,3%	K.A.

Table: Overview over the elections since 1993

With the absence of a comprehensive, international, and independent election moni-

toring mission, it is difficult to judge the propriety of the elections. The election day itself was very calm and peaceful. In fact, the uncharacteristic quiet led many journalists and civil society actors on social media to express doubts over the accuracy of the voter turnout<sup>3</sup>. The 20-day election campaign period prior to the election day was similarly uneventful. This relative silence among the key actors of Cambodia's political and civil society landscape was largely due to the detention of opposition leader Kem Sokha on 3 September 2017 and the dissolution of the largest opposition party, the CNRP, on 16 November 2017.

Other reasons for the relative silence include the shutting down of various media outlets such as Radio Free Asia, the detention of political activists, and the intimidation of voters considering abstaining from the ballot. Only the criticism of international and local non-governmental organizations as well as Western lenders occasionally caused a verbal exchange with the governing party and its international supporters. Even ex-opposition leader Sam Rainsy's call for an election boycott did not trigger a great reaction. Owing to the fear of repression and a feeling of resignation, a significant number of Cambodians thus voted for the governing party that campaigned mantra-like on the promises of growth, peace, and stability. Hence, with this election result, the CPP has secured its power and will continue to dominate Cambodian politics. With no opposition in parliament, media freedom limited, and civil society intimidated, the foundation of a one-party state has been laid.

### Unfair Conditions for Political Competition: Advantage CPP

From 1991 to 1993, under the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), Cambodia steadily transitioned from civil war to a stable and developing state. During this transition, the one-party state system was replaced by a market economy and a multiparty system. While the quality of the democratic system was far from perfect, somewhat competitive elections took place regularly. Thus, since

<sup>1</sup> Hutt, David 2018, Spoilt ballots tally a major protest at Cambodia's poll, Asia Times, 30.07.2018, in: <http://www.atimes.com/article/spoilt-ballots-tally-a-major-protest-at-cambodias-poll/> [31.07.2018].

<sup>2</sup> Sokhean, Ben 2018, CPP sweeps National Assembly as figures from elections come in, The Phnom Penh Post, 31.07.2018, in <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cpp-sweeps-national-assembly-figures-elections-come> [31.07.2018].

<sup>3</sup> Chan Thul, Prak/Sawitta Lefevre, Amy, Cambodian PM's party claims election rout, opposition sees 'death of democracy', Reuters, 30.07.2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-election/cambodian-pms-party-claims-election-rout-opposition-sees-death-of-democracy-idUSKBN1KK01C> [31.07.2018]

1993, six National Assembly elections, four municipal council elections and three indirect Senate elections were held.

While all these elections have been criticized both nationally and internationally in different ways, a key criticism of elections in Cambodia has been the unfair conditions for political competition faced by opposition parties. Many factors contribute to these unfair conditions. These include the fact that news reports by major media outlets are often pro-government owing to their close ties, the financial and structural advantages of the CPP after a very long reign, and the usage of laws to stifle the opposition.

During the 2018 campaign, Hun Sen's charm offensive on textile workers in the special economic zones stood out. By implementing concrete measures to improve living conditions for these textile workers, Hun Sen succeeded in retaining former CNRP voters. These measures included the lowering of electricity prices, the issuing of free bus tickets, and the raising of the minimum wage. In addition, Hun Sen doled out \$5 USD to campaigning female garment workers and \$100 USD to pregnant women. With these measures, Hun Sen was represented in social media as a hero of the people with images of him amongst tens of thousands of young workers at numerous mass events.



The picture shows Prime Minister Hun Sen and his wife Bun Rany voting in Takhmao<sup>4</sup>.

The election campaign of the CPP was accompanied by more appropriate moderate government rhetoric. The rhetoric was less confrontational than in the local elections last year. Following this newly found need

for harmony, Hun Sen called on all parties to run positive election campaigns and thus put a stop to government criticism.

### International Criticism of the Elections

The unfair conditions for political competition were sharply criticized by the European Parliament, Western National Parliaments, and even the inter-parliamentary assembly of the ASEAN states. Numerous resolutions and also sanctions by the USA, Germany, and the EU reflect the international dissatisfaction with the absence of proper structural conditions for free and fair elections. In addition, for the first time, no independent civil society actors such as the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL), or Transparency International participated as election observers.

The day after the dissolution of the CNRP, the US immediately ceased support for the National Electoral Commission. This was followed by visa restrictions on responsible officials and the adoption of the Cambodia Democracy Act on May 10, 2018. The law brought further sanctions against the Cambodian government, including the blocking of accounts, freezing of assets, and maintaining visa restrictions. Though the EU reacted less aggressively than the US, it also stopped supporting the National Electoral Commission.

The political situation and the issue of human rights in Cambodia were also discussed in Germany. Responding to a question by the Green Party in the Bundestag, the Federal Government maintained that it was intensively involved in securing the release of Kem Sokha (CNRP) and the readmission of 118 leading politicians banned from politics. Furthermore, the Federal Government stressed its support for the EU's action and has also suspended development policy programs<sup>5</sup>. In its latest statement, the foreign office, while noting that the elections were peaceful, also expressed concern for the arrest of Kem Sokha, the banishment of top politicians and the dissolution of the CNRP, called upon the values of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement. The only western-

<sup>4</sup> Pha Lina, Preliminary turnout said to be over 82% as votes are cast, 31.07.2018, Phnom Penh Post, in: <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/preliminary-turnout-said-be-over-82-votes-are-cast> [31.07.2018].

<sup>5</sup> Fraktion Bündnis90/Die Grünen, Kleine Anfrage, Demokratie und Menschenrechte in Kambodscha, 19.02.2018, Deutscher Bundestag, in: <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btd/19/008/1900816.pdf> [31.07.2018].

style democracy that did not cease its support for the National Electoral Commission and which held back on public criticism of Cambodia was Japan. However, Tokyo did not send its own election observation mission. In Cambodia, Japan is trying to balance China's influence and hence is pursuing a more geopolitically influenced foreign policy as the EU or the United States.

#### **After the elections. What's next?**

Should the official election results confirm the Cambodian Peoples' Party's takeover of all seats in parliament, then the status of democracy in Cambodia is desolate. With no opposition in the National Assembly, Senate and local councils, the CPP can further consolidate its power and address internal issues. Probably the most important question of this electoral outcome will be who will succeed Hun Sen. Even though Hun Sen's succession is not discussed, and it is maintained that he will govern for 10 more years, social realities change day-by-day. Cambodia's population is very young with two-thirds of Cambodians under 30 years old. As shown in the 2013 elections, the youth are becoming increasingly important. Unlike the older generation of Cambodians, they have no memory of the era of the Khmer Rouge and are less receptive to post-civil war rhetoric and unfair political practices.

As with every generation, new needs, ideals, and expectations emerge. In this respect, calls for less corruption and nepotism, greater state efficiency, economic diversification are getting louder. In a political system which lacks an opposition, media freedom, a powerful civil society and a functioning constitutional state, solving these problems will prove to be very difficult. At the same time, the young generation is also a challenge for the labor market. To prevent further dissatisfaction, the Cambodian economy must provide adequate jobs.

Standing in opposition to this is the network of patronage surrounding the Prime Minister. This network secures the loyalty of key players in the military, police and civil service. Such a system of patronage surrounding one person poses significant risks for future political transitions. The most likely option for political transition is for Hun Sen to be eventually replaced by his son Hun Manet – an individual well-connected to the army. However, when and how the transfer of power takes place is not foreseeable.

Another important question is how Cambodia can repair the damage done to its relations with the West. On the one hand, the government has strongly criticized what it sees as intervention in Cambodian domestic affairs. On the other hand, Cambodia relies on the EU and US as important markets, especially for textile products. Currently, 80 percent of textile products, which make up 37 percent of Cambodia's GDP, are exported to these markets. Duty-free access to the European single market via the "Everything But Arms status" is currently being reviewed by the EU Commission. Clear signals are needed from Cambodia to show improvement with regard to the situation on human rights. One such signal would be the release of Kem Sokha and the re-admission of the 118 top politicians of the CNRP. Although not in accord with democratic principles, it is nonetheless conceivable that, similar to the situation following the dissolution of the CNRP in 2017, the CPP may offer some of its seats in Parliament to the smaller parties.

The currently poor US-Cambodia relations are offset by very good Cambodia-China relations. With huge investments in infrastructure, military cooperation, and a culture of non-intervention, China is viewed favorably by Cambodia. So far, at least in rhetoric, Cambodia pursues a flexible foreign policy. However, this could become increasingly dangerous as Chinese influence increases. Cambodia needs the West to diversify its political and economic relations in order to avoid becoming the plaything of regional and global powers once again.