# Unstable outcome to Cambodian elections

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A week after polling ended, no final results have been announced in the Cambodian national elections held on July 26. Latest counting indicates that the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) headed by Prime Minister Hun Sen is likely to win around 60 seats in the 122-seat National Assembly. The royalist FUNCINPEC party led by Prince Ranariddh is projected to gain 45 seats and the Sam Rainsy Party 18. None of the 36 smaller parties contesting the elections appears likely to win a seat.

Allegations of vote rigging and corruption have surrounded the counting. Both Rainsy and Ranariddh have filed official protests and threatened to boycott the first session of parliament scheduled for September. The final outcome will be further prolonged by the decision of the National Election Committee to recount ballots from a number of election centres where irregularities have been alleged.

It is highly unlikely that the CPP will have sufficient seats to form a government -- under the Cambodian constitution, a two thirds majority, or 82 seats, is required. Hun Sen has already called on the two major opposition parties to enter into negotiations over the formation of a coalition government. At present, the offer has been rejected as being premature.

Hun Sen has insisted that, in any coalition formula, his party holds key ministerial posts controlling the state apparatus and the economy, including defense, interior, justice, finance and foreign affairs. He has also proposed that the CPP president Chea Sim remain as chairman of the National Assembly, with the opposition leaders filling posts as deputy prime ministers.

Whatever the final outcome of the elections and the post-electoral negotiations, the next Cambodian government will be as unstable as the last.

The CPP and its two rivals are bitter political enemies as a result of years of bloody civil war during the 1980s in which FUNCINPEC was allied with the Khmer Rouge against the Hun Sen regime in Phnom Penh. Under the auspices of the United Nations, an imperialist settlement was imposed on Cambodia in 1993 to end the fighting and open up the country for international investors to exploit its cheap labour and resources.

But the national elections conducted in the same year, under the supervision of the UN and an occupation force of 20,000 foreign troops, resulted only in an uneasy standoff. FUNCINPEC which won the largest number of seats shared power with the CPP in a coalition government while each manoeuvred behind the scenes to undermine their rival.

Sam Rainsy, formerly a leading FUNCINPEC member and finance minister, broke with Ranariddh to form his own party. He has sought to bolster his image by supporting strikes by workers for better wages and conditions. Last year Rainsy was nearly killed in a grenade attack which he blames on Hun Sen forces.

Bitter fighting between the rival parties erupted in July last year in Phnom Penh after Hun Sen accused Ranariddh of negotiating secretly with elements of the Khmer Rouge to form an alliance against the CPP. According to UN investigators more than 100 opposition figures were killed. Ranariddh and Rainsy were forced to flee the country.

Considerable international pressure was brought to bear on Hun Sen to permit the return of the opposition leaders and to hold national elections. UN aid payments under the 1993 plan were suspended and limited foreign investment fell, compounding already considerable economic difficulties facing Cambodia.

In the course of the election campaign, both Rainsy and Ranariddh have sought to exploit racial prejudices against the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia. The campaign is directed at the CPP which was installed after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978

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overthrew the previous Khmer Rouge regime. Hun Sen relied on the presence of the Vietnamese army to maintain his rule throughout the 1980s.

The conduct of the elections has become a political issue among the major powers, each of which are seeking to establish their own economic and political beachheads in the country which was isolated for nearly two decades. Cambodia is not only rich in natural resources and is a source of cheap labour, but is strategically placed in a region in which the US, Japan and Europe have high levels of investment.

How the elections are viewed will determine whether or not aid and investment will resume and on what basis. A number of countries, including Australia, have argued that the election should be accepted even if there are cases of fraud and intimidation as long as the result is 'broadly representative'. In the murky world of Cambodian politics, such a criterion clearly favoured the CPP which held the levers of state power in its hands during the pollings.

The US administration, on the other hand, has been critical of the Hun Sen regime and of the national elections. Even before the poll was held, President Clinton publicly branded it as 'fundamentally flawed,' thus giving support to the criticisms of opposition parties.

The same divisions emerged within the group of 678 international observers sent to supervise the elections. The Joint International Observer Group (JIOG) which included members from Europe, Japan, the US and Australia as well as from Asian countries such as Burma and Vietnam, has declared that the campaign and the polling were 'free and fair'.

US members of the JIOG have distanced themselves from the declaration. Former US Congressman Stephen Solarz, co-leader of the US delegation, told a press conference that his 'preliminary judgment' was that the election had been credible. But he condemned the killing of opposition party members last year and left open the option of later revising his opinion of the elections. Since the poll, further allegations of intimidation and harassment of opposition party supporters have surfaced in the media.

A great deal of hypocrisy surrounds the discussion over the elections in Cambodia. The major parties are based on narrow cliques, each of which are seeking to establish their own domination over Cambodia and thus act as the broker for international investors. All of them are engaged in the dirty business of political manoeuvre and do not hesitate to use whatever means are available to undermine their rivals.

For their part, the US and other powers are seeking a regime amenable to their own interests. The debate over whether the elections were fair or not is simply a means for supporting one or other of the Cambodian factions. In these circles, the democratic rights of ordinary Cambodians and the harsh economic conditions facing working people are a matter of scant concern.

See Also:
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[18 April 1998]

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