

Standoff over Cambodian election result

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The opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) is challenging the result of the Cambodian national election on July 28 after making substantial gains at the expense of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

The provisional results put the CPP of Prime Minister Hun Sen ahead of the CNRP by 68 seats to 55. Last Tuesday, however, opposition leader Sam Rainsy claimed that his party had won 63 seats in the 123-seat National Assembly. The opposition has threatened to boycott the assembly unless an independent investigation into the election result is held.

The US State Department, the European Union and non-government organisations have also called for an independent investigation into electoral vote rigging, including the claim that over a million Cambodians were excluded from the electoral roll. On Saturday, the two parties reached a shaky agreement in principle with the National Election Committee for a joint inquiry into polling irregularities.

The election outcome is a substantial blow to the CPP, which in one form or another has ruled Cambodia since the 1979 Vietnamese invasion that ousted the Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot. In the 2008 election, the CPP won 90 seats.

The government's loss of support reflects deep social tensions. With a population of 15 million, Cambodia is one of the poorest nations in Asia with half of the state budget dependent on foreign aid. Hun Sen has transformed the country into a cheap labour platform, leading to a deepening divide between rich and poor.

After his landslide win in 2008, Hun Sen with the support of the two members of the royalist FUNCINPEC party ran roughshod over the opposition. In 2012, the two opposition parties—Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party—merged to form the CNRP. In June this year, Hun Sen had the 29 opposition MPs expelled from the national assembly on

the grounds that they had resigned from the parties for which they were elected.

Rainsy, a former finance minister who was expelled from FUNCINPEC in 1994, is known for his pro-Western orientation and anti-Vietnamese chauvinism. He had been living in self-imposed exile in France after he was convicted in 2009 over an incident involving Vietnamese border posts. He only returned to Cambodia on July 19 after head of state, King Norodom Sihamoni, pardoned him on July 15.

The government appears to have allowed Rainsy to return as a concession to Washington. On June 7, US senators Lindsey Graham and Marco Rubio moved to freeze its aid to Cambodia, currently running at \$US76 million a year, if the elections were not "credible and competitive".

It is likely that Rainsy's return was discussed in a meeting between US President Obama and Hun Sen in Phnom Penh in November 2012 during the US-Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Leaders Meeting.

According to a report prepared for the US Congress on July 24 by the Congressional Research Service, the two leaders discussed Obama's demand for greater freedom for opposition parties along with a possible future deal for the US to forego \$450 million in Cambodian debt from the days of the Lon Nol government in the 1970s.

The November meeting occurred just four months after Phnom Penh blocked efforts by the Philippines and Vietnam at an ASEAN Ministerial meeting to push through a communiqué calling for multi-lateral negotiations over their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. The Obama administration has backed such talks as part of its "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining Chinese influence. Cambodia sided with China and supported its position that negotiations should be bilateral.

The Hun Sen government is attempting to manoeuvre between China and the US. China is Cambodia's biggest aid donor with aid of about \$200 million a year and also its biggest investor with accumulated investments of \$9 billion compared to American investments of \$1.19 billion. The US, however, is the largest market for Cambodian exports, taking more than a third of the total and over half of its garment exports. The garment industry employs 400,000 Cambodians.

While maintaining relations with Beijing, Hun Sen has sought closer diplomatic and military ties with the US. Cambodian and American armed forces have conducted joint military exercises—the third annual Angkor Sentinel exercise was held in Cambodia in March and joint naval training took place in October 2012.

During the election, opposition leaders exploited anger in rural areas over the government's hand-over of land for Chinese investment projects. The Cambodian Centre for Human Rights claims that 50 percent of land concessions made since 1994, some 4.6 million hectares, have been given to Chinese companies involved in mining, hydropower, hard wood harvesting and agriculture.

Earlier this year, Hun Sen promised to secure land ownership by granting titles to 500,000 farmers, to suspend land concessions and to return some property grabbed by developers. In June, however, he suspended the program until after the election.

On his return to Cambodia, Rainsy led a motorcade of several thousand supporters through the rural Kampong Speu and Takeo provinces. Stirring up anti-Chinese sentiment, he called for “sympathy for our nation, which is being destroyed. Land and forests, lakes and mines are running out.” Rainsy also lashed out at Cambodians of Vietnamese ethnicity telling people at Takeo's Ang Tasom market that the “Yuon take all our land, and the Khmer get poorer.”

The CNRP also sought to exploit the high levels of unemployment, especially among young people, and growing social inequality with empty promises to lift wages and provide free health care. The Asia Development Bank predicts Cambodia's GDP will grow by 7.2 percent this year, but this is heavily dependent on foreign investment taking advantage of the country's very low wages. The UN World

Investment Report estimates foreign direct investment will grow by 73 percent this year.

Rainsy is clearly angling for Western support for his claims to have won the election. At this stage, however, the Obama administration's response to the result has been low-key. Hun Sen made his own indirect appeal to Washington with a threat to turn to China if the US reduces aid to Cambodia. Speaking last Friday, he declared: “If [the US] wants to cut aid, just cut it. Don't talk so much.”



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