

Disputed election result fuels tensions in Cambodia

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19 August 2013

There is a continued political standoff in Cambodia over the July 28 national elections, following the National Election Committee (NEC) announcement of provisional results last Monday.

The NEC supported the election night claims of Prime Minister Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) that it had won 68 seats in the 123-seat national parliament, with the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) led by Sam Rainsy taking 55 seats. Six other parties failed to win enough votes to gain any seats.

While the CPP claimed victory, the purported result was nevertheless a blow to the party, which has ruled Cambodia since Vietnam intervened militarily in 1979 to oust the Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot. In the last parliament, the CPP held 90 seats following a landslide win in the 2008 election.

The opposition has refused to recognise the outcome. Last Wednesday, the CNRP formally filed complaints, meaning that the NEC will not be able to ratify the results before September 8. The party has disputed the result in 15 provinces and challenged the overall vote, claiming improper voter registration lists could have denied a vote to more than one million people. The CNRP claims to have won 63 seats and thus the right to form the next government.

On his return from an 11-day visit to the US last Friday, opposition leader Rainsy denounced the election results, claiming that one million "ghost" names had been put on the registration lists to bolster the CPP's vote.

Rainsy criticised the CPP for deploying troops and armoured vehicles in the capital Phnom Penh following the failure of the government and opposition to reach any agreement on an inquiry into the conduct of the election. Rainsy said Hun Sen would have to accept

such an investigation.

Government spokesman Cheam Yeap responded by declaring: "We will withdraw the army when Sam Rainsy stops calling on people to protest en masse and when the situation is normal." The CPP also warned on August 8 that CNRP members would be held personally liable for violence or property damage during opposition demonstrations.

The situation remains tense, but the CNRP has toned down its rhetoric, declaring that mass protests and a parliamentary boycott would be a "last resort."

Rainsy's trip to the US was nominally to attend his daughter's wedding, but he was clearly looking for Washington's backing for a regime-change operation in Cambodia. On his return, Rainsy declared: "The whole world knows that the CNRP won the election and the whole world will help CNRP to expose the truth—the truth is that CNRP won the election."

However, support from the US and European powers has been muted.

On August 12, European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton called on the CNRP to come to a "swift" agreement on the investigation of election irregularities with other parties. "In the current situation, it is critical that all parties maintain a peaceful and democratic spirit conducive to strengthening the democratic process in Cambodia," she said.

Last Thursday, US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki repeated earlier concerns over allegations of election irregularities, but stressed: "We urge the leaders of Cambodia's political parties to return to the negotiating table and to work together for an outcome that serves the best interest of the Cambodian people."

The Obama administration's primary concern is to undermine the influence of China in Cambodia as part

of its aggressive “pivot to Asia,” aimed at containing China militarily and diplomatically throughout the region. Washington has not immediately backed Rainsy, a right-wing pro-US politician, in part because Hun Sen has already established closer military ties with the US.

It appears that Hun Sen used these military relations to send a warning to Washington not to encourage Rainsy.

On August 12, US State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf announced that Cambodia’s Defence Ministry had “postponed or cancelled a number of international military programs, including the United States.” She said the “unilateral” decision by Cambodia was made “in the context of the National Election Committee announcing some preliminary results, so we are going to keep watching the process as it unfolds and see where we go from there.”

The following day, the Cambodian government denied there were any cancellations, claiming the delays in some joint military programs were normal and unrelated to the election. On the same day, the US Embassy in Phnom Penh backtracked from the State Department statement, endorsing the Cambodian version of events. Embassy spokesman Sean McIntosh stated that the “postponements” were only until the next government was formed.

In the event, the Obama administration seems unwilling at present to compromise its developing relations with the Hun Sen regime. From 2010 to 2012, it has increased military funding to Cambodia from \$US1.2 million to \$US5.7 million. While China is Cambodia’s largest source of investment and financial aid, the US remains the largest destination for its exports, taking one third overall and half of its vital garment exports.

The CPP’s declining vote reflects deep resentment over the growth of social inequality that has flowed from the regime’s transformation of Cambodia into a cheap labour platform. Opposition is mounting against the government’s autocratic methods of rule and corruption, with widespread anger over the role of the military as thugs-for-hire in land-grabs on behalf of foreign investors, including those from China.

The CNRP has exploited this resentment while supporting the CPP’s pro-market agenda. It would be just as ruthless in suppressing any resistance by

working people if it formed government.



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