

Political deadlock over Cambodian election continues

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Nearly two months after Cambodia's national election on July 28, the standoff between the ruling Cambodian Peoples Party (CPP) and the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) continues. Clashes last Sunday between police and opposition protesters left one man dead and five injured.

The National Election Committee (NEC) announced the final results on September 8, confirming that Prime Minister Hun Sen's CPP won 68 seats in the 123-member National Assembly, compared to 55 seats for the opposition CNRP. The result was in line with the provisional tally announced last month.

The NEC and the Constitutional Council, the country's senior judicial body acting as a court of disputed returns, rejected CNRP assertions that it won 63 seats. CNRP leader Sam Rainsy claimed that up to one million "ghost" voters stole the election from the opposition. The NEC stated that its inquiry found irregularities but these were not significant enough to affect the final outcome.

Last Saturday, head of state King Norodom Sihamoni held a meeting with Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy in a bid to end the political confrontation. He called for a compromise and urged both parties to attend the opening of the National Assembly on September 23. The CNRP has threatened to boycott the opening session.

Some 10,000 opposition protesters gathered in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh on Sunday to demand an international inquiry into the election result. Several clashes took place between police and demonstrators, the most serious in the Kbal Thnai Bridge area where a man was shot dead and others were injured.

National Military Police spokesman Kheng Tito claimed the police used only teargas, batons and smoke

grenades. However, the US-based Human Rights Watch said its staff saw military police "loading and arming assault rifles and automatic pistols with live ammunition."

Protests continued on Monday and Tuesday as the government and opposition held further negotiations to break the political deadlock. After five hours of talks on Monday, the two sides agreed to a vague proposal for reforms to the NEC, but as of yesterday no agreement had been reached on the opposition's demand for an inquiry into the election.

The July 28 result was a blow to the CCP, which won the 2008 election with a 90-seat landslide. Hun Sen ruled in coalition with the royalist FUNCINPEC party, dominating the national assembly, where a divided opposition had just 29 seats. Hun Sen has been in power since he was installed as premier after the Vietnamese army ousted the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979.

The opposition CNRP was formed in 2012 through the merger of the Human Rights Party of Kem Sokha and the Sam Rainsy Party. In a significant concession to the opposition, the government permitted Rainsy, a right-wing pro-Western politician, to return to Cambodia from exile this year to contest the election.

The CNRP was able to capitalise on widespread hostility to the country's deepening social divide, high levels of youth unemployment and the government's land concessions to foreign investors. Rainsy also stirred up anti-Vietnamese and anti-Chinese sentiment, lashing out at foreigners for allegedly taking Khmer land.

The CNRP has no fundamental differences with the government's economic policies. Like the CPP, it would open the door to foreign capital to expand the transformation of the country into a cheap labour

platform. However, whereas the CPP has been closely aligned with China and reliant on Chinese aid and investment, the CNRP is oriented to the US and its allies.

In the wake of the election, Rainsy has made a pitch for international support, especially from the US, to overturn the result. He told a September 7 rally: “We will continue to hold demonstrations until there’s a solution—an independent [international] commission to investigate election irregularities.”

After last week’s NEC ruling, Rainsy declared: “[W]e will not participate in any form of government or any form of arrangement with the ruling party, because it is a matter of principle.” He warned that “Cambodia will be really headed for trouble, for instability” if the CPP formed a government while the opposition boycotted the National Assembly.

There are, however, divisions in the opposition’s ranks. CNRP leader Kem Sokha told the September 7 rally: “We don’t want a revolution, we don’t want a brawl. We just want justice.” He later indicated that the CNRP would boycott the assembly’s first session and left future participation open.

To date, the Obama administration has not publicly supported the opposition in its bid to oust Hun Sen. On September 9, US State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf repeated Washington’s call for a “transparent review” of alleged election irregularities. But pressed by a reporter to comment on the NEC’s decision to ratify the election results, Harf refused to do so. “I’m not saying it’s a good or bad thing,” she said. We still have concerns about some of the irregularities.”

The low-key response indicates that the US is not about to upset its developing ties with the Hun Sen regime. Like his counterparts throughout the region, Hun Sen has sought to balance between Beijing, Cambodia’s principal donor and investor, and Washington, its main export trading partner.

The Obama administration has been seeking to ease Cambodia out of the orbit of China, in the same way that it did with the military-backed regime in Burma. Cambodia is part of the Lower Mekong Initiative established by the US to exploit the hostility of downstream countries to China’s activities, including dams, on the upper reaches of the Mekong River. The US is also developing closer ties with the Cambodian

military, increasing aid from \$US1.2 million in 2010 to \$5.7 million in 2012.



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