

Cambodian government bans rallies and protests

John Roberts
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The Cambodian government led by Prime Minister Hun Sen intensified its crackdown on opposition leaders, union officials and striking garment workers over the weekend, after military police shot and killed at least four workers and injured dozens more last Friday.

The government closed down a protest site in Phnom Penh used by the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) and banned all rallies and assemblies in the capital. While the ban is nominally directed at the CNRP, by implication is also applies to protests and demonstrations by striking workers.

Garment workers have been involved in a national strike since December 24 to demand a doubling of their poverty level wages from \$US80 a month to \$160. Last week, the government offered a pay rise of \$95 and issued an ultimatum for strikers to return to work on Thursday. When strikers refused to back down, military police armed with assault rifles attacked protesting workers last Friday.

The CNRP led by Sam Rainsy has latched onto the strike as a means of furthering its demands for fresh elections. The opposition party, which made significant gains in the July national election, claims that the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CCP) rigged the result to cling to power.

Rainsy, a right-wing populist, promised to grant the pay raise to garment workers—a pledge that he has not the slightest intention of keeping. Like the government, the CNRP is committed to maintaining Cambodia as a cheap labour platform for foreign investors. While Cambodian wages are lower than those in China, Malaysia and Thailand, they are higher than Bangladesh and Myanmar. The garment industry employs around 350,000 workers in 500 factories and produces around 80 percent of the country's exports.

Rainsy denounced the violence against striking workers on Friday, but called off a major opposition rally

scheduled for Sunday.

On Saturday, government authorities shut down a permanent opposition protest site at Freedom Park. Plain clothes security guards and municipal workers moved into the public square located near the city's tourist district armed with axes, batons and steel pipes and forcibly drove off hundreds of protestors. They then began removing the stage and tents erected there since the renewal of opposition protests in December. Riot police supervised the demolition and three helicopters hovered overhead.

Lang Rith told the Associated Press that he had been hit on the back as he tried to run away. "They beat us like animals. I am very scared," he said. Freedom Park, or Democracy Square, was established in 2009 as the one place in the capital where protests could legally be held.

Authorities have used the violent suppression of striking workers as the pretext to further restrict basic democratic rights. Public assemblies, and by implication strikes and pickets, are to be banned "until the security situation and public order is returned to normal," according to a statement issued by Phnom Penh officials.

Justifying the new security measures, National Police spokesman Keat Chantharith declared: "There are anarchists involved in the protests, which are affecting social order and security. We can't allow that to continue."

The *Cambodia Daily* reported: "In the heart of the garment factory area in Phnom Penh's Pur Senchey district, around Veng Sreng Street, where Friday's violence occurred, hundreds of battlefield troops, particularly from the Brigade 70 unit, were deployed Saturday and were patrolling streets in large military trucks and jeeps mounted with light machine guns.

"Residents and garment workers in the area said that thousands of workers have returned to their home provinces for fear of further repression by the forces now

deployed in the area. One mini-bus driver said he had taken two van loads of workers to Svay Rieng province Saturday. Passengers said they were fleeing in fear.”

Two CNRT leaders—Rainsy and Kem Sokha—have been summoned to court in mid-January to answer allegations that they caused “serious turmoil.” The Phnom Penh Municipal Court has also summoned Cambodian Independent Teachers’ Association President Rong Chhun on charges that he “incited workers to violently clash with the armed forces.”

According to CNRP officials, Rainsy and Sokha have been moved to a “safe place.” Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union vice president Kong Athit said he had moved to an undisclosed place on the outskirts of the capital. He said he had been unable to contact union leader Ath Thorn who was rumoured to be the target of an arrest warrant.

CNRP and union officials have quickly moved to block any confrontation between the government and the working class. CNRP spokesman Yim Sovann condemned the Freedom Party closure, then added: “We call on people to stay calm for a period of time, while we plan our next activities.”

Rainsy and Sokha attended a Buddhist ceremony on Sunday for those killed in Friday’s attack on protestors. Sokha also called for calm, saying: “I appeal to all people to remain calm and avoid any incitement to violence which is the government’s trap.”

Both factions of the ruling elite—government and opposition alike—fear the development of an independent movement of the working class. The national strike of garment workers follows mounting anger over low wages and poor conditions that resulted in 131 stoppages between January and November last year.

At this stage, following the violent attacks on Friday and Saturday, it is unclear to what extent the national strike is continuing.



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