

Cambodian government arrests opposition leader on treason charges

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Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) government have intensified an ongoing crackdown against the country's largest opposition party.

Kem Sokha, president of the right-wing, pro-Western Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), was charged with treason on September 5, after being arrested on September 2.

The treason charge alleges "colluding with foreigners," in effect with the United States, to destabilise the government. A conviction would mean a jail term of 15 to 30 years.

The government was rattled by the CNRP's gains in June's local elections. The arrest aims to weaken the opposition before the national elections set for next July. In the past year, over 20 opposition figures and government critics have been jailed.

The June poll for 1,646 communes saw the CNRP vote increase by 13.3 percentage points to 43.8 percent. The ruling CPP's vote dropped 10.9 percentage points from previous local elections.

The CNRP won 489 commune chief positions, up from the previous 40, and 5,007 commune councillors, up by 2,052. The CPP's commune chief posts fell from 1,592 to 1,156 and councillors from 8,292 to 6,505.

In national elections in 2013, the CNRP came close to toppling the Hun Sen government. The CPP had its seats in the 123-member National Assembly reduced from 90 to 68. The CNRP officially won 55 seats but claimed vote rigging deprived it of another eight seats.

While representing different factions of the ruling elites, the CPP and CNRP both support the transformation of Cambodia into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors. If the CNRP took office it would be just as ruthless as the CPP in suppressing the opposition of working people.

The CPP has ruled since it was installed in the wake of the Vietnamese 1979 invasion to oust the Khmer Rouge regime. It has been aligned for two decades with Beijing.

Washington has never accepted Phnom Penh's pro-China orientation and organised a UN intervention in the country in 1992-1993. The Hun Sen regime was forced to allow in Western organisations and eventually establish trials of surviving Khmer Rouge leaders.

One Western organisation active in Cambodia has been the US-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI), which has been at centre of the treason charges levelled against Sokha. The NDI, which was founded in 1983 via the Congress-created National Endowment for Democracy, operates in 70 countries to promote US interests.

The opposition CNRP represents a section of the ruling elite, oriented toward Washington, that resents its exclusion from political and economic power by the CPP's authoritarian rule. The US was involved in setting up the party in 2012 and, as Hun Sen had grown closer to Beijing, the CNRP remains Washington's preferred political instrument.

In January 2016, when US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Phnom Penh, he met CNRP leaders as well as figures from the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR), which Sokha founded and the US has supported.

In charging Sokha, the prosecutors have used a video of his address in 2013 to CNRP supporters in Australia. In it, Sokha described US assistance in forming the CCHR in 2002. He told his audience: "The US says that if you want to change the dictatorial leader, you cannot change the top, you need to change the bottom first—this is its democratic strategy."

The government points to ongoing US intrigues. The

NDI has been forced to withdraw its foreign staff from the country and end its programs. This followed a Facebook posting in mid-August that included a leaked NDI training video showing that the NDI was working with the CNRP on tactics to win the scheduled July elections.

On September 4 the government shut down the *Cambodia Daily*, which has criticised its policies. It also banned 15 radio stations involved with news and programs from the Voice of America (VofA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA), two other US-funded organisations set up to promote US foreign policy.

Hun Sen's resort to police-state measures to undermine the opposition is bound up with government's inability to make any appeal to working people on the basis of their democratic aspirations and social needs.

The CPP has cracked down on any opposition to pro-market policies. In 2013 and 2014 it used the security forces to suppress wage struggles involving 700,000 workers in the garment and footwear sectors. In the 2013 election, the CNRP sought to appeal to workers, while hiding its own commitment to the market and foreign investment.

To counter the CNRP last September, Hun Sen granted workers in these industries a 9 percent pay rise, to \$US153 a month. This year at an August 27 meeting with 4,000 workers, he promised cheaper water and said employers would pay 100 percent of workers' health care cover from January.

Hun Sen told the August meeting that just as in 1970 the US used military general Lon Nol to topple King Norodom Sihanouk, "now the Americans do this problem with Kem Sokha."

Social inequality is continuing to widen. A study cited in the *Phnom Penh Post* on August 23 shows that \$500 million flows annually into the countryside from the garment sector. However, only the better-off villagers benefit.

Some 90 percent of workers send most of their pay home to deal with family debts as the price of farm inputs rises. The workers living in urban areas struggle to survive on the remainder of the pay and many suffer from poor health.

The US backing for the CNRP has nothing to do with the democratic rights and social conditions facing working people in Cambodia. Washington is concerned

that far from moving away from Beijing, Hun Sen is forming closer ties.

The Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies warned in May that Hun Sen "has moved to shrink ties with Washington and deepen relations with China." It noted: "His actions to distance himself from the United States [suspending US military cooperation while increasing that with Beijing] appear intended to give Washington less leverage to voice criticism of his moves in the wake of the [recent] elections."

China provides Cambodia with more than half of the 75 percent of foreign direct investment originating from outside the Association of South East Asian Nations. The largest Western investor is Britain, which supplies just 3 percent of that total.



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