

Cambodia: the winner takes it all: 2018 elections set country firmly on path towards authoritarianism

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Cambodia: The Winner Takes It All

2018 Elections Set Country Firmly on Path towards Authoritarianism

Chum Chandarin and Felix Heiduk

There was never any doubt who would win Cambodia's 2018 elections, with electoral politics skewed to favour Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). The CPP has already declared victory, claiming 76 per cent of votes and all of the 125 parliamentary seats. The elections were condemned as a "sham" by the opposition after the dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), the imprisonment of CNRP leader Kem Sokha, and a crackdown on civil society and the media. These events mark a watershed in Cambodian politics, indicating the establishment of a single-party autocracy backed by China.

Since the early 1990s Cambodia's national and local elections have been marred by vote buying, corruption, and tight government control of the media. They have been considered to be not entirely free and certainly not fair. While the electoral process has always been skewed in favour of the ruling CPP under the leadership of Hun Sen, the dissolution of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) marks a watershed. What we are now seeing in Cambodian politics is a transition from more than two decades of electoral authoritarianism – during which elections were never free and fair but still competitive – to a new period of one-party autocracy under the personalist leadership of Hun Sen. While Hun Sen declared that "the government will commit to protecting the multiparty democracy process" after the CNRP's dissolution, it is clear that none of the twenty parties competing in the 2018

elections stood a chance of challenging the CPP's grip on power at the ballot box.

So why did Hun Sen decide to de facto terminate electoral competition by dissolving the only viable opposition party? One important factor was paranoia over the threat of a Western-backed, CNRP-led "people power" movement. Another reason is found in the results of the last national elections in 2013, as well as the local elections in 2017. In 2013 the CNRP, founded in 2012 as a merger of two opposition parties, increased its share of the vote to 44 percent, while the CPP's support declined from 58 to 49 percent. The CNRP rode a wave of urban and rural discontent over the perceived corruption of the Hun Sen government and the lack of trickle-down benefits from Cambodia's strong economic growth. The huge Chinese investments driving Cambodia's economic boom have thus far largely benefited Hun Sen's associates and the country's



small upper and upper-middle classes. On the other hand, parts of the population have been negatively affected through phenomena such as the soaring cost of living in the cities and land-grabbing in rural areas.

Consequently, local elections in the 1,621 local authorities across the country saw the opposition grow from 2,955 councillors in 2012 to 5,007 in 2017. Those results also indicated that the CPP's lead over the CNRP represented only about 7 per cent of the popular vote. A survey conducted in 2016 suggested that 44 per cent planned to vote for the CNRP in 2018 and only 33 per cent for the CPP. Some reports even suggested the CNRP might achieve as much as 53 per cent in 2018 despite attempts by the government to shape electoral politics in favour of the ruling party. For the first time since the 1990s a change of government via competitive elections was deemed plausible.

These developments created a situation where the ruling party became uncertain about its grip on power. To secure its regime, the CPP amended the legislation on political parties, arrested the CNRP's leader, and dissolved the party. The CPP now claimed all 125 parliamentary seats and controls over 95 per cent of local councillors.

Shrinking political space

Along with the opposition party, Civil society organizations working on democ-

racy, human rights and/or election-related issues were also targeted with measures including the controversial new Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations passed in 2015. The latter's broad and vague definitions allow the government to take selectively legal action against vocal and critical groups if their actions are considered to threaten national security and stability. Similarly, independent media outlets that were previously platforms where critics of the government and opposition parties could voice their opinions and raise awareness on social issues such as land-grabbing, human trafficking, corruption and human rights violations came also under attack. The *Cambodia Daily* was closed down over a tax bill in September 2017, while the *Phnom Penh Post* was sold to a Malaysian PR firm with ties to the Cambodian government. Its editor-in-chief was fired after publicizing the sale and revealing the new ownership. Radio Free Asia was forced to close its Phnom Penh office, and more than thirty local radio stations were ordered to stop relaying RFA/Voice of America programmes or face legal repercussions. Social networks like Facebook have also come under scrutiny: In May 2018 the interior, post and telecommunication, and information ministries created a joint working group to investigate any public post or comment they believe threatens the ruling party. A number of Cambodians have already been arrested for comments on Facebook that the government believe threaten social stability.

Table 1

Political parties and their votes in recent elections

Political party	National election 2013			Local elections 2017		
	CPP	CNRP	Others	CPP	CNRP	Others
Number of votes	3,235,969	2,946,176	445,014	3,540,056	3,056,824	377,031
Vote as %	48.83	44.46	6.71	50.76	43.83	5.41
Representatives	68	55	0	6,503	5,007	62

At the time of publication the official election results for the 2018 elections had not yet been published.

In recent years Hun Sen has also tightened his grip on power within the state. Today Cambodia is essentially a one-party state with Hun Sen as its undisputed leader. Not only has Hun Sen cracked down on civil society and the media and outlawed the major opposition party; he has come to dominate Cambodian politics to such an extent that the CPP and the bureaucracy have become secondary institutions. In a strategy of personalised rule, Hun Sen not only dominates the CPP, but has also taken control of the bureaucracy and the army and police chains of command by appointing relatives and close aides to key positions. He has also built up his own paramilitary security force outside the formal chain of command. As such, Hun Sen has set Cambodian politics on a fast track to a one-party autocracy.

Diplomatic shifts: China

The domestic political clampdown has been accompanied by a diplomatic shift. Western donors, perceived by Hun Sen as too intrusive, have increasingly been supplanted by no-strings-attached Chinese support. For almost a quarter of a century the United States, European countries, Australia and other donors have helped to rebuild war-torn Cambodia after the defeat of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. Billions of dollars have been invested to transform Cambodia into a liberal democracy. Since 1993, however, Hun Sen's CPP has largely controlled Cambodian politics in semi-authoritarian fashion. The CPP held regular elections with Western support, but the opposition never stood a chance of winning due to extensive fraud, intimidation, and lack of funding. Criticism of Cambodia's electoral authoritarianism by Western donors led Hun Sen to employ an increasingly anti-Western narrative, condemning Western powers for meddling in Cambodia's internal affairs and treating it as a pawn in a geopolitical game against China.

As a result, Cambodia has increasingly aligned itself diplomatically (as well as mili-

tarily and economically) with China. China has supplied loans and aid without conditions concerning human rights or the rule of law. Between 2016 and 2017 there were more than a dozen state visits by senior Chinese leaders, including Xi Jinping in October 2016. The Chinese leadership has repeatedly praised Hun Sen's leadership and assured him of their unwavering support. Hun Sen in return praised China as Cambodia's most trustworthy friend. The two countries have signed a number of agreements to create special economic zones, increase the number of Chinese tourists, and implement One Belt One Road plans in Cambodia. Over half of all foreign direct investment in Cambodia in 2016 came from China. Much of Cambodia's consistently strong economic growth (over 6 percent annually) is driven by Chinese investments in infrastructure and industry as well by Chinese tourism. Beijing has also provided millions of dollars worth of military aid in recent years, donating military vehicles and uniforms, tanks, patrol boats, assault rifles and helping to build military training facilities. Cambodia in turn has lent its support to various Chinese foreign policy initiatives, for example repeatedly watering down ASEAN communiqués addressing China's territorial ambitions in the South China Sea. Other ASEAN states have accused Cambodia of undermining regional cooperation on behalf of China. Diplomatically, Cambodia's descent into authoritarianism also reflects a perception in the region that the United States, and to a lesser extent Europe, have withdrawn, leaving the field to China.

Europe needs to send a strong message

If Cambodia's transition to authoritarianism proceeds smoothly domestically and internationally, this could send a message to other autocracies in waiting in the region and beyond. The lesson from Cambodia being that it is possible to make the change to authoritarian rule with very few political

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and economic costs if you have China's backing, while criticism from Europe remains just words. If Cambodia's transition to dictatorship were to be successful, other states in the region could see this as a path to follow. So a strong reaction from Brussels is crucial. Already some European investors have been put off by endemic corruption, not to mention the shrill anti-Western rhetoric. In the wake of the recent crackdown, diplomatic ties between Cambodia and numerous donor countries have further weakened. The Trump administration has cut aid to Cambodia, imposed visa restrictions on top officials and cancelled all funds earmarked for supporting July's national election. Japan withdrew its election observers. The European Union also withdrew its election observers and suspended financial assistance to the Cambodian National Election Committee. Brussels has also been reviewing Cambodia's eligibility for the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) agreement, which grants tariff-free access to the European market under the "Everything But Arms" (EBA) scheme. Cambodia is the second-biggest beneficiary of EBA after Bangladesh, accounting for 18 percent of all EBA imports to the EU, which is the destination for over 40 percent of its apparel exports. While China can curry favour with unconditional aids and loans, it cannot replace the garment and textile export markets in the United States and Europe. 61.1 percent of Cambodia's \$10.1 billion in exports went to the EU and United States in 2016, while China accounted for only 6 percent. Over one million jobs in Cambodia depend on the export sector (largely garments). According to a recent report by Moody's Investors Service, dependency on EU and US markets make the Cambodian economy vulnerable to "shocks". The lack of export diversification provides Europe with a degree of leverage.

In the aftermath of the election, the European Union needs to send a strong message. Its review of Cambodia's inclusion

in the EBA scheme needs to be completed quickly. Leading Cambodian government officials should face visa sanctions and the freezing of their foreign financial assets. The EU, whose market is the destination for a significant proportion of Cambodia's exports, should seriously consider denying tariff-free access. Under the GSP agreement tariff preferences could be withdrawn temporarily or permanently in response to the government crackdown on the opposition prior to the elections.

Most importantly, Brussels and EU member states should call out Cambodia's elections for what they are: democratic window dressing of an increasingly autocratic regime. Unless democracy is restored in line with the Paris Peace Accords signed by Cambodia's warring factions in 1991 after decades of civil war, European government would be well advised to move from threatening sanctions to implementing them.

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