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ANALYSIS

CAMBODIA'S 2008 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: PROSPECTS FOR OPPOSITION POLITICS

Kheang Un

On July 27, 2008, Cambodia held its fourth parliamentary elections since the 1993 United Nations sponsored elections that ended Cambodia's 14 year civil war. Eleven political parties contested these elections of which only the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) were the largest and best organized. The election results showed that the CPP, the former communist party which had ruled Cambodia throughout the 1980s, made substantial gains, capturing 90 seats in the 123-seat National Assembly—up from 73 seats in the previous assembly. The main opposition party, the SRP, made a slight gain of two seats from last election's 24 seats. The National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) collapsed, winning only two seats, down from 26, as it split into FUNCINPEC and the Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP)—established by and named after the former FUNCINPEC president ousted in 2006. The Human Rights Party (HRP) and the NRP, founded in July 2007 and 2006 respectively, captured only two seats each.

Opposition parties led by the SRP rejected the results, citing political intimidation and violence, as well as biased electoral machinery. They also alleged that the National Election Committee colluded with pro-CPP local authorities to delete potential opposition supporters names from voting lists, changed polling stations shortly before the voting to confuse opposition supporters, and issued fraudulent forms that allowed persons not on the lists to vote. However, without evidence of massive malfeasance, and given the CPP's wide margin of victory, these irregularities were not significant enough to have reversed the electoral outcome. There are other additional explanations for the CPP's triumph.

FROM PREDATORY STATE TO A SERVICE STATE

Over the past ten years, the CPP controlled state has gained more legitimacy with the public; particularly the rural population. This is reflected in a higher vote share in both local and national elections. The support for the CPP stems from two key factors. First, the country has experienced peace and political stability for a decade under CPP-controlled governments and voters are loathe to risk instability by voting for the opposition. Second, CPP control over the state allows the party to command personalized networks with business tycoons and military leaders alike. Such connections permeate and supersede state institutions, and also provide the party with tremendous resources. These CPP networks are used to devote time and resources to developing local communities and addressing villagers' needs through the building of schools, roads, irrigations canals, ponds and temples. As a result of these projects, development funds flowing to local communities, in the name of the CPP and Prime Minister Hun Sen, were almost double of the amount provided by the state. Despite persistent poverty, the majority of Cambodians, particularly those who are from rural

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areas, now see the state under CPP control as a “predatory state” that has been transformed into a welcome “service state.” Although the sources of finance for these projects are not transparent and are widely known to be associated with illegal exploitation of natural resources and corruption, recipients appear satisfied with the CPP efforts to attend to their immediate needs.

CPP power and support also derives from its control of the Cambodian mass media. The CPP regulates all television channels and oversees or has affiliations with all but two radio channels. Some 90% of Cambodians get their news through either of these two forms. Opposition parties’ use of the media was also curtailed. Although only nine percent of Cambodians read newspapers on a regular basis, the opposition was only granted limited freedom to publish in newspapers that wrote critically of the government. Some opposition journalists have been killed, apparently in politically motivated cases, while others were jailed on charges of defamation and disinformation. Many critics have suggested that this unequal access to the media was one of the most significant factors that contributed to the opposition parties’ failure to capture a plurality of votes.

A DIVIDED OPPOSITION

Another factor that explained the CPP’s commanding electoral victory was the weakness of the SRP, its main opposition. Some of the SRP’s problems, including internal quarreling, were self-inflicted, while the CPP was responsible for facilitating defections of local SRP supporters and party officials both domestically and abroad. The CPP knew that the idealism of some individuals within the opposition parties might not stand the test of time and thus used its control over the state and financial resources to draw members of the SRP to defect. Prime Minister Hun Sen also lured opposition party leaders to the CPP by awarding them positions in the government. Although the number of voters the SRP might have lost is unknown, the CPP forced the SRP to spend a tremendous amount of time and effort doing damage control. Moreover, as during previous elections, opposition parties were unable to form a united front against the CPP. Rather than forming a “union of democrats,” opposition political parties fought against each other to present themselves as the only viable alternative to the CPP.

A STRONG ECONOMY AND A SURGE OF NATIONALISM: A PLUS FOR THE CPP

Sam Rainsy attempted to configure opposition politics by appealing to urban voters and youth, campaigning against corruption, weak rule of law, and weak government accountability. Although widespread corruption exists, its institutionalized and predictable nature has normalized the process in the view of many Cambodian and foreign investors;

and despite these problems the economy has continued to grow.

This year’s election took place amid strong economic growth of around 10 percent, fueled by expansion in the construction, service, and tourist sectors, and the continued strength of the garment industry. Simultaneously, a wave of nationalism helped the CPP carry the election. Opposition parties attempted, as they had done previously, to capitalize on the popular sense of insecurity over their neighbors’ ill intentions, real or perceived, towards Cambodia. Opposition parties continued to accuse the CPP of permitting millions of illegal Vietnamese immigrants to settle and vote in Cambodia and allowing Vietnam and Thailand to encroach on Cambodian territory. Opposition parties gained significant legitimacy by arguing that they were the ones fighting for national independence and sovereignty.

But leading up to these elections, the ruling party government succeeded in countering the opposition’s propaganda when it successfully negotiated with the Thai government over the listing of Preah Vihear Temple—an 11th century Angkorean style temple located along the Thai-Cambodian border—as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. This is a victory that the Cambodian people celebrated with joy, and the public was left with an image of the CPP as defenders of Cambodia’s sovereignty. The military standoff with the Thais in the aftermath of the UNESCO designation was perfectly timed to portray the CPP as strong enough to prevent Thailand’s attempt to “swallow Cambodian territory”; many people, especially young people, were focused on the border drama and experienced a surge of national pride.

ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY FOR THE LONG HAUL?

The CPP has effectively gained a monopoly on power and seems to be transforming Cambodia into a de facto one party democracy. With prospects positive for continued economic growth, and with a potential windfall forthcoming from oil and gas reserves, the CPP dominated government will likely adopt the ideology of a developmental state—stressing social order, stability, and economic growth, but not liberal democracy. Given entrenched corruption and patronage networks, the party must face the challenge of maintaining the current rate of economic growth while also allowing for a greater downward flow of development benefits to the poor—particularly to the large number of youth who hold higher expectations than the previous generation. If not, then opposition to the CPP’s monopoly on power may strengthen over time and potentially cause the CPP government to limit the possibility of opposition victory through repression.