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Cambodia, Communes and ... Change?

Commune-level elections in Cambodia are a pretty good indicator of the outcome of national elections. Results are hardly ever surprising - but the opposition are now starting to fight back.

By Llyr Soun for ISN

“I’ve won already.”

Although commune elections were only held in early June, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen was so sure of their outcome that he made that prediction to the [Phnom Penh Post](#) back in January. Moreover, on May 5th, he [told the press](#) that he would leave office if he did not get 60% of the votes in the commune elections. It seems he did not have much reason to be anything other than self-assured because, as expected, the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) [took](#) 1,592 seats out of 1,633 on June 3. This is an improvement on previous election results and makes the CPP the dominant player in the National Assembly in 2013.

Confusing participation

However, the actual number of Cambodians who actually voted that day remains unclear. According to the National Election Committee (NEC), turnout was initially recorded at 51%, with a revised figure of 65.13% released on June 22nd. A low turnout [was](#) also attributed to the lack of proper ballot papers and interest among voters. One may think that electing a local representative would be politically motivating – but as a researcher for Licadho, a local NGO, told ISN Security Watch, “Citizens know that decisions are made at a higher level. Why vote if you know it will not change anything?”

Moreover, the figures released by the NEC do not tell the whole story. Instead, they only indicate how many *registered* people voted, not how many *eligible* voters voted. The Committee for Free and Fair elections (COMFREL) deployed 5,852 election observers and found “no serious irregularities, violence or otherwise” -- but also [admitted](#) that 49% of eligible voters could not vote at their polling stations.

The main reason, as reported by the press and local NGOs, was the manipulation of voter registration lists generated by the NEC. In an interview with the ISN, an NEC spokesperson admitted that, “the number of voters on the lists did not reflect the number of individuals voting,” as people can be registered twice. The spokesperson continued, “We’d like to find a solution but we cannot do it unless the voter tells us, in person, where he/she votes and wants to be registered.” When officially asked how many voters were registered compared to how many voters were eligible, the NEC declined to comment.

Licadho also noted that the voting system favors the CPP:

“When the CPP states that they know who votes for whom, they are not entirely wrong,” one of their researchers told ISN Security Watch. Due to the way ballots are counted, anonymity is not guaranteed. With each polling station covering only a very small amount of the population, the NEC has a very precise map of how a specific part of a village casts their votes. “This contributes to the low [level of] trust that Cambodians have in the elections,” the researcher continued. It also acts as a form of intimidation into voting for the CPP.

Fear and discrimination

While COMFREL qualified the elections as “less violent,” the organization also [acknowledged](#) that “some voters felt insecure or fearful when they expressed criticism of the ruling party or revealed their support of opposition candidates or parties.” Voters in some communes were also fearful because of acts of brutality that had been perpetrated prior to polling day. These included the death of an environmental activist in Koh Kong province and the detention of 13 Boeung Kak community representatives in Phnom Penh.

The director of the [Cambodian Center for Independent Media](#) (CCIM), Pa Nguon Teang also claimed that the ruling party was intimidating Cambodian citizens. Interviewed during the electoral campaign, Teang told the ISN that “there are places in Cambodia where the CPP called villagers for meetings and threatened them if they did not vote for the CPP.” Their news team recorded cases of evictions while Licadho reported cases where the commune chief does not let villages that vote for the opposition use stretches of road built by the CPP. However, while Licadho also accepted that “it is very difficult to know if state discrimination is only due to political views,” the organization also noted that “in most of the stations, the CPP commune chief was watching everyone voting...which is totally illegal”. According to a CCIM researcher there was so much manipulation that the party did not actually need any violence to win.

Targeting the media

During the election campaign, the [National Democratic Institute](#) (NDI) organized public debates in ten Cambodian provinces. According to NDI surveys, 88% of the attendees declared that the debates changed their opinion on one or more of the parties or candidates. For Laura Thornton, resident director of the NDI office in Cambodia, “the fact that simply sitting through one debate would change the opinion of almost 90% of participants is remarkable. It demonstrates citizens’ hunger for information from parties and candidates and their appreciation of constructive, respectful, and fair exchange of opinions and ideas.”

While Mr Teang thought that the debates were effective -- allowing citizens to actually meet and talk to the candidates -- he also raised concerns that “the debates create an opportunity for the ruling party to win. They are not helping the small opposition parties since they don’t have the same resources as the CPP.” Mr Teang’s organization, the CCIM, operates the independent radio station *Sarika FM*, the country’s only Khmer radio station broadcasting hourly news reports. On election day the production team was preparing to broadcast news related to the elections when the owner asked Mr Teang to stop broadcasting following a phone call from the Ministry of Information. “I had to negotiate when we could go back on air. It is censorship because only *Radio Free Asia (RFA)*, *Voice of America (VOA)* and our radio station had to stop broadcasting on election day.”

This move was [internationally](#) condemned and qualified as “[contrary](#) to the principles of free and fair elections.” At the time, the NEC -- whose role it is to ensure a free and fair election process -- stated that it was unaware of such a ban. Asked to comment on the issue, the NEC answered “there is

always a 'white day' where no political campaign information should be broadcast. It happens for each election." However, on June 3rd, only the stations mentioned above, plus *Radio Australia* and *Radio France International*, were asked to be off-air. Cambodian stations were banned from retransmitting programs from these broadcasters.

What next?

Immediately after the results of the elections were revealed, the opposition started to think about forming a union. In some provinces, if the two main opposition parties – the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party – had allied with each other, the CPP could have been destabilized. National elections are not until July 2013 but the opposition is already starting to prepare. On June 4th, the Human Rights Party [announced](#) its intention to merge with the Sam Rainsy Party. However, Prime Minister Hun Sen [declared](#) he did not think this alliance would be a threat to the CPP. And while it could theoretically pose a challenge to the incumbent regime, the opposition undoubtedly has a long way to go in terms of organization and planning.

That elections in Cambodia need to be more transparent is a view shared among the international community. While 22 foreign observers were allowed to monitor the commune elections in June, there is a lot more at stake in the national elections. The United States has already [called](#) for "appropriate participation across the political spectrum" as well as the return of the opposition leader Sam Rainsy. Currently, Rainsy lives in exile in France after fleeing Cambodia in 2010 following what he claims were politically motivated convictions [for disinformation and falsifying maps](#).

Along with the faint hope that the opposition can organize itself in time comes an ingrained pessimism. [According](#) to Dr Sok Touch, an independent political analyst "[Cambodians] think that the Khmer politicians are all the same, they can't change the situation and they are very tired of their empty and illusory promises."

Cambodians inside and outside the country knew the CPP would win the commune elections. They imagine the CPP will probably win the national elections in 2013. This will continue to be the case as long as the voting system allows the CPP to have a precise map of voters' opinions and use techniques of intimidation. But with a ruling party now feeling the need to target media and provoke fear among the population while an opposition starts to organize, Cambodians could be forgiven for seeing signs that change may be on its way.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Cambodia Human Development Report 2011](#)

[Cambodia's Bumpy Development Road](#)

[Land Rights in Cambodia](#)

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