PHNOM PENH - Cambodia's ruling party won a landslide victory in local elections on June 3. The poll was notable for a dip in voter turnout, which analysts said is a blow to the country's opposition parties. Some said it's an indication that the divided opposition needs to unite if it hopes to present a legitimate challenge in next year's national elections.

Even prior to the commune (district subdivision) elections, the results were all but a forgone conclusion. As expected, the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) dominated the vote, seizing 97 percent of the commune chief positions nationwide.

Opposition parties saw the election as a stepping stone - a way to build momentum in the run-up to general elections scheduled for July 2013. But if the commune elections were a step forward, they were a modest one.

The country’s largest opposition group, the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), lost ground, even in its traditional stronghold of Phnom Penh.

**Poll significant for low voter turnout**

The poll was also significant for what appears to be a drop in voter turnout. Election monitors estimate that roughly 60 percent of registered voters came to the polls this year - a dip from the 67 percent who voted in the previous election, and a big drop from the 87 percent who voted a decade ago. And that may well be the most troubling sign for Cambodia’s divided opposition.

“More people believe that their vote doesn’t count,” said Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.
The governing CPP has dominated politics here for the better part of two decades - a feat, critics say, made possible in part by its control over the media and a deeply entrenched system of patronage. The opposition has been quick to accuse the government of dirty election tricks.

However, Virak said such repeated claims can also backfire.

“So to me I think that's a mistake of some of the opposition in saying that the fact that the National Election Committee is not independent and the fact that the CPP controls most of the institutions, therefore your vote will not count and the election will be rigged anyway," Virak said. "If you go saying that, then your supporters will probably be the ones who are not going to vote. So the drop of the voter turnout is affecting the opposition most.”

**Opposition fatigue**

The CPP has a well-oiled election machine, skilled at bringing its supporters to the voting booth on election day. For the opposition, however, Sunday’s results may reflect a sense of voter fatigue.

Thun Saray, president of Adhoc, a local rights group, said "there have been many elections happening in the last 20 years but [the voters] didn't see any political change through these elections. [That's] the reason why the turnout is less and less. That is my concern.”

For the Human Rights Party, this week’s election was a breakthrough. Competing in its first commune elections, the HRP secured almost as many commune chief seats as the more established SRP.

**Mending opposition fences**

Saray said it’s clear the two parties must now work together if opposition supporters have any hope of mounting a real challenge during next year’s general election.

Yet plans to form a coalition or even merge the two parties have been discussed even before this election, but the two sides have been unable to form anything concrete. Observers say the SRP has been reluctant to share the spotlight. That may well have changed with the HRP’s results in the commune elections.

HRP president Kem Sokha said his first choice is to merge the party with the SRP. He said both opposition parties need to sit down and talk for the sake of the Cambodian people, and he hopes to hold discussions with Sam Rainsy in July.

Reached by phone this week in Brussels, party leader Sam Rainsy said he believed the opposition parties have to work together.“The objective is to unite all opposition forces to bring about a change through a new majority at the next election next year,” he said.

But it remains to be seen whether the personalities from the two parties can co-exist in a single party.