

Ruling CPP Courts Informal Workers in Election Campaign.



*Informal workers at a beer garden in Phnom Penh on January 30, 2023.
(CamboJA/Pring Samrang)*

The ruling CPP declared support for self-employed workers in the informal economy and promised to provide them with long-sought social security benefits, during the party's extraordinary congress this weekend in Phnom Penh, where it laid out its policy platform.

Yet CPP spokesperson Sok Eysan said the party's interest in informal workers' rights was no mere political gambit but part of a long-term strategy to establish a more robust and inclusive social protection system.

"The CPP-led government will focus on both formal and informal workers," Eysan said. "We will pay much attention by providing them with the national social security fund and providing lawyers to protect the rights of women who work in the entertainment sector."

CPP vice president Men Sam An is set to spearhead efforts to secure benefits for these workers, who include cyclo and tuk-tuk drivers, street vendors and construction workers, according to Eysan.

The majority of Cambodians work in the informal economy, according to the [International Labor Organization](#).

The CPP's sudden interest in the rights of workers in the informal economy is an effort to attract their support at the voting booth, said Vorn Pao, president of the Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA). But he said the party's support, even if out of political self-interest, would be "a good thing" if it means implementing existing labor laws to provide self-employed workers with National Social Security Fund (NSSF) cards.

"They see the need for citizens who have been working as informal economic workers, including in entertainment services, having not yet received [NSSF cards]," Pao said. "It is a chance for the ruling party to seek support from them."

The government has already implemented a pilot scheme to provide NSSF benefits to 2,050 tuk-tuk drivers who are IDEA members and 300 domestic workers from the Association of Domestic Workers (ADW).

Ou Tep Phallin, president of Cambodian Food Service Workers Federation, said Cambodian [labor laws](#) already cover workers in the informal economy but the law has not yet been fully implemented.

Employers are required to contribute to their employees' [NSSF](#) benefits under the 2019 Law on Social Security Schemes. So far few informal workers have access to NSSF benefits, despite often being legally self-employed as in the case of tuk-tuk drivers.

Other members of the informal economy include domestic workers, but employers may not sign them up for NSSF as it would require spending more money.

“Some employers are not honest enough to register [them] and have made some workers not receive social benefits,” Phallin said.

The 2019 law says domestic workers and their employers must jointly contribute to pension and healthcare benefit schemes while employers must cover contributions for occupational risk, or accident, insurance. But other areas of the law remain vague, such as the lack of clear contribution rules related to occupational risk insurance for self-employed people.

Election atmosphere

While the party's agenda included promoting a more inclusive social protection system, it also reiterated support for Prime Minister Hun Sen's leadership as he nears his fourth decade in power, quelling rumors that his son and CPP-heir apparent Hun Manet might succeed him in this year's elections.

The CPP claimed it was committed to supporting a strong multi-party democracy, even as Hun Sen recently threatened violence and legal action against opposition party leaders.

“As the ruling party, we don't want a gloomy atmosphere towards elections, so if we work together to maintain a good atmosphere, it will benefit the fair, free and fair election,” Eysan said. “Those who abuse the law, they make the political environment gloomy...they must face legal action.”



CPP leaders and members attend the party's extraordinary congress at the CPP's headquarter in Phnom Penh on January 28, 2023. (Hun Sen FB page)

Candlelight co-vice president Thach Seta remains in jail after being arrested earlier this month for alleged bad checks issued in 2019. Candlelight co-vice president Son Chhay and top advisor Kong Korm were each sued by the CPP and face property seizure to repay damages.

The CPP has said it would oppose any activities seen by the party to undermine rule of law, peace and democracy: "In this spirit, it is necessary to eliminate all forms of politics and extremist activities from Cambodian territory by not allowing this to cause national division," said the statement.

Opposition Candlelight party called on foreign donor nations like Japan and the U.S. to push for a free and fair election process and guarantee political rights.

The Japanese Embassy to Phnom Penh said in an email statement that the Japanese government wants the upcoming national elections to be conducted in a free and fair manner. The embassy said it had dispatched a Japan International Cooperation Agency expert to embed with the National Election Committee to provide technical assistance in voter education.

“In this regard, we are closely following the current political situation in Cambodia,” the embassy said. “In enhancing people’s understanding of democracy and election, voter education has a significant role.”

While donors like the U.S. and E.U. withdrew election-related funding to Cambodia after the court-ordered dissolution of the main opposition CNRP in 2017, Japan has continued to invest in the election process.

US Embassy spokesperson Stephanie Arzate said that the United States remains committed to the Cambodian people’s aspirations for a more prosperous, democratic, and independent country where all voices are heard and respected.

“We urge authorities to strengthen multiparty democracy in Cambodia by allowing opposing political views, welcoming competition through inclusive free and fair elections, and promoting the free and open exchange of ideas,” she said.

Chak Sopheap, executive director of Cambodia Center for Human Rights, said that authorities must put an end to the continued harassment of the political opposition to ensure the run-up election be free and fair.

“This situation has been exacerbated by the further deterioration of human rights in the country,” she said. “All these events constitute alarming signs of the lack of free and fair electoral guarantees for the upcoming national elections.”