Cambodians Brace for One-Sided Election

In this photo taken on July 4, 2023, a member (L) of Cambodia’s Grassroots Democratic Party (GDP) distributes political campaign leaflets during the general election campaign in Phnom Penh.

PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA — Cambodians head to the polls this month in an election that has been widely criticized by Western countries, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and pro-democracy activists, but authorities in Phnom Penh insist the ballot on July 23 will be free and fair.

On the campaign trail, Prime Minister Hun Sen has dismissed his many critics and says he will run on his record. That includes his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, what he argues was a
successful year chairing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations last year and staging the Southeast Asia Games in May.

Additionally, the Khmer Rouge tribunal has concluded and Hun Sen says this country will be cleared of all landmines by 2025 – the legacy of 30 years of war that ended in 1998. Cambodian deminers have just finished training courses for their Ukrainian counterparts in Poland.

Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party “rescued the Cambodian people from the mass killing of the Khmer Rouge regime and its brought peace to the country, especially its built infrastructure,” said Sim Sareth, a keen supporter of Hun Sen and his CPP.
“There are roads, schools and other infrastructure,” he told VOA, noting Hun Sen has increased social welfare payments for the poor and promised to create 300,000 jobs over the coming year.

More than 100,000 police and military personnel have been deployed across the country to ensure security during the campaign period, which has been lackluster when compared with 10 years ago, when the Cambodian National Rescue Party came close to winning the overall vote.

However, its success was short-lived. The CNRP was outlawed by the courts in late 2017 for plotting to overthrow the government, enabling the CPP to win all 125 seats at general elections the following year, and Cambodia emerged as a one-party-state.

Since then, more than 100 opposition supporters have faced the courts on charges ranging from incitement to treason amid a six-year crackdown on dissent. Many have been jailed, including CNRP chief Kem Sokha, who is serving a 27-year sentence. Others have fled abroad.

The Candlelight Party was established out of the remnants of the CNRP and won more than 22% of the popular vote at last year’s commune elections, providing the only real challenge to the CPP, which has ruled Cambodia for more than four decades.
However, in May, the Candlelight Party was barred from competing in this year's election after the National Election Committee ruled it had lodged incorrect electoral registration papers.

The Washington Post said in an editorial that this would amount to a “lopsided win in a rigged parliamentary election” which meant the CPP is “on track to win all the 125 seats of the National Assembly, mirroring the result of the last such charade in 2018.”

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, told VOA June 29 that Hun Sen has ensured security but the costs to society have been too great.

“So the same cycle repeats with the threat against press freedom, political freedom and also civil rights against citizens, so this [does] not constitute for a free and fair election,” she said.

Western nations were also vocal in criticizing the Candlelight disqualification, jailing of dissidents and the closure of Voice of Democracy – among Cambodia’s last independent media outlets – ordered by Hun Sen in February.
U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said VOD’s closure would have “a chilling impact on access to information ahead of the national elections in July.” The German Federal Foreign Office said the disqualification “runs counter to pluralism and democratic principles.”

The French Foreign Ministry said France “deplores the exclusion of the Candlelight Party” and Guterres noted the Candlelight Party was the sole credible challenger to the CPP.

Australian Ambassador to Phnom Penh Justin Whyatt added he was “deeply concerned” about the disqualification, saying “Cambodian democracy is not served by this development.”

Hun Sen defended the election committee’s ruling, saying “foreigners have no right to order us to do this or do that according to their wishes, for this is our internal affair.”

Shortly afterward, he deleted his Facebook account before it could be suspended after an Oversight Board board for Facebook parent company Meta found he had breached community standards by threatening to have people beaten.

Of the remaining 17 political parties, the royalist Funcinpec Party – once a powerhouse in Cambodian politics – is talking up its chances under its new leader, Prince Norodom Chakrvuth.
Funcinpec won just 5.8% of the overall vote in 2018 and failed to win any seats in the last two national elections, but one party spokesman recently claimed Funcinpec expected to win at least half of the open National Assembly seats.

“It’s possible that Funcinpec can win two, maybe three seats, but it won’t win any more than that, in all probability it won’t win any,” one Western diplomat, who asked not to be named, told VOA.

Another seven political outfits have recently been formed while each of the remaining parties barely managed to score more than 1% of the overall vote in 2018 elections.

The election committee has also warned against boycotting the poll or spoiling ballot papers saying this would constitute a crime, which analysts said had prompted the government to rush through amendments to laws that ensure only those who vote can run in future elections.

Bradley Murg, a distinguished senior research fellow with the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, said this election is still important because Hun Sen has stated quite clearly he intends to retire and hand power to his oldest son, Hun Manet, at some point after the poll.
“These elections do represent essentially a transition of power, a generational change that’s been expected for quite some time,” he said.

“It does mark what we’re consistently being told and what most scholars see is, yes, we are seeing a generational shift from Prime Minister Hun Sen to Hun Manet.”

Hun Sen has not said exactly when he will be prepared to stand aside, although some Western diplomats have said this could happen as early as September.