

Cambodia PM Hun Sen's party claims 'landslide' in flawed election

Critics described the election as the least free and fair in decades



due to exclusion of main opposition party.

Phnom Penh, Cambodia – Prime Minister Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has claimed a "landslide" victory in national elections described by critics as the [country's least free and fair vote in decades](#).

"We've won a landslide victory but so far there is no clear figures yet [on seats won]," said Sok Eysan, spokesperson for the CPP, just hours after polls closed on Sunday.

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The claim of an election walkover by the governing party followed after Hun Sen said voter turnout hit 84 percent on Sunday.

Hun Sen said the strong voter participation proved that a campaign to undermine the election – by what he described as an “extremist” opposition – had failed, Reuters news agency reported. Some 9.7 million people registered to vote among Cambodia's approximately 16 million population.

Voters who had destroyed their ballot papers in protest against the election should turn themselves in to authorities or face “legal consequences”, Hun Sen said in a message on the Telegram messaging app, Reuters reported.

Opponents and human rights groups had [blasted the election due to the lack of credible competition](#) as well as Hun Sen's strongman tactics that have now silenced all opposition to his rule in Cambodia.

The National Election Committee (NEC) reported earlier on Sunday that two people were arrested under laws recently passed to prevent people from protesting against the one-sided election by spoiling their votes.

One of those detained had drawn an “X” over their ballot paper and posted an image on social media, and the second person had stuffed the ballot in their pocket to remove it from the voting station and discard it, NEC spokesperson Som Morida said.

Images of spoiled ballot papers were being shared on Telegram and Facebook, Mu Sochua, an opposition leader living in exile, told Al Jazeera.

“I totally respect their courage. It’s an expression of anger, resentment, real defiance,” she said.

Mu Sochua also described the election in a separate interview with Al Jazeera as “theatre” and called on the international community to impose sanctions on Hun Sen and other members of the CPP.

‘Predictable outcome’

Eighteen parties, including Hun Sen’s juggernaut CPP, participated in the election, though none of the 17 smaller parties had the popular support to present a serious challenge to Hun Sen’s decades of authoritarian leadership.

The only credible opposition challenger – [the Candlelight Party](#) – was disqualified from participating in the vote due to a registration technicality in May, which critics blasted as yet another example of Hun Sen’s flattening of democratic participation in the country.

Opposition supporters were arrested in the run-up to Sunday’s vote for allegedly encouraging the spoiling of ballot papers in protest of the one-horse election race. Internet service providers were also ordered to block access to the websites of several independent news and information outlets.

Ahead of voting, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) said a “predictable outcome” from “an illegitimate process” could be expected from the election.

The vote, FIDH said, was set to mirror the country’s last national election in 2018 when the then-popular Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) was banned from political life, which allowed Hun Sen to win all seats in parliament.

The popular CNRP had come close to defeating Hun Sen in national elections a decade ago but [came under pressure from Hun Sen](#) and the country's courts, which banned the party in 2017 after another strong showing in local elections.

As the longest-serving elected leader in Asia, Hun Sen has consolidated power in Cambodia over the past 38 years. This election victory is expected to see him now pave the way for a transfer of power to his son, Hun Manet, who is head of the Cambodian army.

Voters interviewed by Al Jazeera on Sunday gave differing views of the election process with some welcoming the exclusion of the opposition from voting, and former supporters of the CNRP telling of the fear they now feel under an increasingly authoritarian Hun Sen.

“Whenever there's opposition, it's messy, causing problems,” voter Tea Yumao, 50, said.

A 37-year-old taxi driver told how he “loved” Cambodia's now-banned opposition CNRP and its leaders but feared government repercussions if he did not vote on Sunday. He also believed authorities had ways of discovering how people voted.

“I'm very worried about them saying they can see our vote afterwards,” he told Al Jazeera, requesting anonymity as he feared consequences for speaking with reporters, shortly after casting his ballot.

“We know the situation. We know the truth. But we can't speak,” he added.

Hun Sen succession

A 44-year-old voter in Phnom Penh, who also asked that her name not be used, told Al Jazeera she was unhappy with the lack of competition in the election.

But she said she looked forward to Hun Sen stepping aside to allow his son, Hun Manet, to become prime minister.

“I only know that this year, it will be the son who takes over,” the woman said, adding that she hopes a new prime minister focuses on the economy and the poor.



Hun Manet, son of Prime Minister Hun Sen, shows his inked finger – an election security feature used in Cambodia as proof of voting – after casting his ballot in Phnom Penh, July 23, 2023 [Cindy Liu/Reuters]

Hun Manet, who graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point and holds a PhD from a university in the United Kingdom, rose quickly through Cambodian military ranks and became commander of the army in 2018.

He stood in Sunday’s election for the first time hoping to win a national assembly seat.

While some see the power handover from father to son as possibly heralding a new start in Cambodia, others doubt that Hun Sen is ready to give up control entirely.

Waiting outside a polling station in Phnom Penh's Dangkao district, Mao Ny Sai said people know little about Hun Manet and she has not heard him lay out plans for the country.

"There's not much known about him," the 52-year-old said of the likely future prime minister.

"He's young," she said.

"As a parent", Hun Sen will keep watch over his son, she added.

Joshua Kurlantzick, a senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the US think tank the Council on Foreign Relations, said the planned succession was not universally supported in Cambodia's power structures.

"Hun Manet is supposedly going to be Hun Sen's successor, although pulling off a dynastic succession is not easy and there are many powerful Cambodians opposed to the move," Kurlantzick [wrote](#) earlier this month.