New Gov’t More Than Doubles Secretary and Undersecretary of State Positions in Ministries

New cabinet members and lawmakers pose outside the National Assembly on August 21, 2023. (CamboJA/Pring Samrang)

The newly formed government has 1,422 secretaries or undersecretaries of state — a 121.8% increase from the previous government, which had only 641 officials in those positions.

The list of new appointments was released on Tuesday evening through government-aligned media Fresh News.
Many of these appointments appear to have gone to relatives of current or former ruling CPP officials and also a flurry of former opposition leaders, environmental activists and union leaders who joined the ruling CPP in the lead-up to July elections.

“We have seen the appointments are linked with a lot of high-ranking officials’ children,” said Yong Kim Eng, president of the People Centre for Development Peace, an NGO advocating for transparency in governance.

In one example, the four of the sons of the late CPP stalwart and longtime head of the Council of Ministers, were all promoted to high ranking cabinet positions. Sok Sangvar became a Public Service Ministry secretary of state, Sok Puthivuth became a Posts and Telecommunications Ministry secretary of state, Sok Sokan became a Land Management Ministry secretary of state and Sok Soken was given the top job of Tourism Minister.

“It is ok if these officials dutifully serve the nation but if the appointments are just to provide them with a favor, citizens will be disappointed,” Kim Eng added. “We are concerned about the expanding budget and wonder what kinds of jobs they will carry out daily.”

The Office of the Council of Ministers and the Defense and Interior Ministries had the largest increases in officials.
The Council of Ministers gained 54 secretaries of state and 35 undersecretaries, compared to 15 secretaries and 23 undersecretaries in the old government under the 6th mandate.

The Interior Ministry added 104 officials in contrast to the mere 22 officials it had in the last mandate, while the Defense Ministry gained 86 officials in contrast to 38 such officials previously.

The remaining 25 ministries received between 15 to 30 secretaries and undersecretaries combined.

Chak Sopheap, executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights said that the decision to more than double the number of government officials might reduce the government’s performance and outcomes.

“It would have been better to appoint a smaller cabinet, ensuring lower public spending levels and guaranteeing the proper function of this critical body,” she said.

Only 15% of senior ministry personnel are women, according to analysis from public database Kamnotra. The defense ministry has the lowest percentage at 4.7% and all other ministries fall below 25%, Kamnotra’s analysis found.

Prime Minister Hun Manet also added 29 officials with the title of “Ministerial Delegate Attached to the Prime Minister” to accompany and assist him. The newly appointed officials included Pen Bona, formerly a Information Ministry secretary of state and director of
PNN Television owned by tycoon Ly Yong Phat, and Jean-François Tain, former managing director of Radio France Internationale.

The new officials also included former senior leaders of the Grassroots Democratic Party, Yang Saing Koma and Loek Sothea, who were appointed as secretary and undersecretary of state to the Agriculture Ministry. Former party general secretary Sam Inn was given an Environment Ministry secretary of state job.

Former CNRP activists were also given high ranking positions. Yim Sinorn, who was arrested for disparaging Hun Sen and then publicly apologized and defected to the CPP in April, was promoted from Agriculture Ministry undersecretary of state to secretary of state.

Two CPP-aligned union leaders, Som Aun and Chuon Mom Thol, were re-appointed as Labor Ministry secretary of states.

Aun had previously been president of the Cambodia Labor Union Federation until 2021 when he was first appointed as a secretary of state. Thol, who also became secretary of state in 2021, founded the Cambodian Confederation of Trade Union in 1997.

Other ruling CPP family connections include Defense Ministry Secretary of State Khim Bunsong’s son Khim Finan, previously Banteay Srey district governor, became Agriculture Ministry secretary of state.

Anti Corruption Unit (ACU) Chairman and newly-appointed Senior Minister Om Yentieng’s daughter Yentieng Puthirasmey appointed
Foreign Affairs Ministry Secretary of State. Om Yentieng’s son Yentieng Puthira, formerly ACU director-general, has been appointed Post and Telecommunications Ministry Under Secretary of State.

Former Senior Minister Cham Prasidh’s son Cham Borith became a secretary of state for the Industry, Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry. Borth’s sister Cham Nimul is the newly appointed Commerce Minister.

Outgoing Interior Minister Sar Kheng’s cousin Sar Thet is the new National Police Chief replacing Hun Sen’s cousin Neth Savoeun. Thet was formerly the Phnom Penh municipal police chief and the deputy of the National Police. He is the uncle of new Interior Minister Sar Sokha, Sar Kheng’s son.

Savoeun, appointed as a deputy prime minister, is designated as the acting prime minister in Manet’s absence, will also manage national security and public order, according to government orders signed by Hun Manet and published on state-owned media.

If Savoeun is also absent, the back-up acting prime minister is Minister of Economy and Finance Aun Punmoniroth. In his role as deputy prime minister, he is tasked with managing the economic and financial sector. He is also chairman of the National Council for Social Protection and the Chairman of the Supreme National Economic Council.
The new government cabinet is scheduled to hold its first meeting on Thursday, according to the Information Ministry.

CCHR’s Sopheap said that the new government will be faced with a choice: embrace longstanding repressive tactics or preside over a shift towards more inclusive forms of governance based on respect for fundamental freedoms.

“IT should not be forgotten that the new administration is the product of a ruling elite that has turned Cambodia into a de facto one-party state where dissenting voices are not tolerated,” she said. “Many individuals continue to be seen as enemies of the state.”