IN announcing his return to politics, former prime minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh has again raised hopes of a rebirth for the country’s downtrodden and divided royalist movement.

Speaking to about 500 supporters in Kampong Cham province on Saturday, Prince Ranariddh said he would soon return to head the Nationalist Party, which plans this month to re-adopt its old name, the Norodom Ranariddh Party, to mark the occasion.

But after more than two years out of the game – Ranariddh announced his retirement in October 2008, after returning from a period of self-exile – observers say the former royalist figurehead faces significant obstacles, both in uniting his own camp and in re-establishing his political credentials.

The Prince’s announcement caps off a period of uncertainty for the royalists, in which he was courted by representatives of both the NP/NRP and Funcinpec, which expelled him in 2006 after he was accused of embezzling party funds. Announcing his return to politics on Saturday, Ranariddh chose to side with the NP/NRP, the breakaway party he formed after his expulsion.

In his remarks to supporters, he came out swinging, accusing his former Funcinpec party colleagues of selling out to the ruling Cambodian People’s Party in exchange for “rotten posts” in government and other personal benefits. He issued appeals for Funcinpec members to decamp and join the NP/NRP.

The Prince also struck a confrontational pose in relation to the CPP, accusing National Assembly President Heng Samrin and his deputy Nguon Nhel of restricting debate in parliament. His new promise is to take a centrist stance, speaking out on government policies from a neutral standpoint.

It’s been a while since the royalists acted as a true opposition, with Funcinpec having long accommodated itself to its powerful coalition partner in exchange for a role – however minimal – in government.

Son Soubert, a political observer and former member of the Constitutional Council, said Funcinpec had devolved into a CPP “mouthpiece” used to maintain a façade of democratic diversity in government, and that a fresh approach from the royalists would benefit the country.

“If Prince Ranariddh is willing to positively criticise the government, it’s a good thing,” said Son Soubert. “It’s best if the royalists stick to their ideals. Otherwise it’s hopeless.”

Awkward timing
But Ranariddh’s announcement may be ill-timed for the rest of the royalist camp. Funcinpec and the Nationalist Party have embarked on an ambitious plan to reunite ahead of the 2013 elections in a bid to put the past divisions behind them.

The parties have so far engaged in months of talks, which have become snagged on issues of what the new party should be called and how plum posts should be divided up among the
parties’ powerbrokers.

Though Ranariddh remains committed to the merger plan, he said Funcinpec President Keo Puth Reaksmey and Secretary General Nhek Bun Chhay no longer had the support of the people. These criticisms threaten to reopen old wounds. Whether Ranariddh can reunify the royalists without his former comrades – by force of personality and principal alone – remains to be seen.

“I still don’t believe these personalities can be reconciled,” Son Soubert said, referring to the Funcinpec leadership. “It’s better for Prince Ranariddh to keep his own agenda and see what he can do for the rest of the country.”

Prince Sisowath Sirirath, Funcinpec’s second deputy president, downplayed the Prince’s comments, saying the two parties would continue to meet to discuss the merger plan.

“In politics, people try to bring about a better image for themselves by criticising others,” he said. “I’m not too concerned about that.”

In either case, the Prince faces an uphill battle. Since he led Funcinpec to a stunning victory in the UN-backed 1993 elections, clinching 58 of the National Assembly’s 123 seats, the party’s fortunes have soured. Its electoral returns dropped from 43 seats in 1998 to 26 seats in 2003. In 2008, the two royalist parties claimed just four seats between them.

“He’s lost all the momentum,” said Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights.

“I think it will be much more difficult for him to come back this way. Coming back will only succeed if something dramatic happens to propel him back into politics.”

Cheam Yeap, a senior CPP lawmaker, said he welcomed the Prince’s return to political life, saying he could aid and advise the ruling party, but dismissed his accusations the government had gagged parliamentary debate.

“The internal rules are not the law, they are just rules for parliamentarians,” Cheam Yeap said.

Ranariddh, like his father, former King Norodom Sihanouk, may not be able to resist the lure of the limelight – “doing politics is the same as being addicted to opium,” he admitted to supporters on the weekend – but whether his appeal strikes a chord will have to wait until commune council elections scheduled for 2012.

“We never know,” Son Soubert said. “It depends on the Cambodian people.”