Cambodia Awaits Fallout of US Midterm Elections

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Cambodian political observers say the recent midterm elections in the US that gave control of the House of Representatives to Republicans could have a ripple effect in Cambodia—through foreign policy, human rights and even the economy.

“I want the Republicans to continue the foreign policy they have been doing, which was tough on dictators, no matter where they are, including..."
Cambodia,” said Kem Sokha, president of the minority opposition Human Rights Party. “Once dictators do something wrong, there must be objection, not leniency. In my view, being lenient towards dictators cannot be successful. The Republicans' consistent warnings to dictators are good for the benefit of democratic fighters.”

However, Mu Sochua, a lawmaker for the main opposition Sam Rainsy Party, said the election is not likely to shift US policy, especially following last week's visit of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Still, she said, “the Republicans' position toward the promotion of democracy is sharper than that of the Democrats.”

Under the former administration of George W. Bush, “if they wanted to help change a country, they provided direct support there,” Mu Sochua said. “Whereas Democrats would take an issue into long consideration before sending troops into a country. However, this doesn't affect Cambodia very much because we don't have armed disputes.”

Last week's elections saw Republicans take 239 of 435 House seats, followed by 187 for Democrats, with nine seats still up for grabs as
votes are counted. Democrats, the party of
President Barrack Obama, retained control of
the Senate.

Koy Kuong, a spokesman for the Ministry of
Foreign Affairs, said such elections made little
difference.

“This is totally internal US politics,” he said.

Cambodia-US relations have warmed in recent
years. Cambodia has proven a willing ally in the
US campaign against terrorism, and with
Clinton's visit signaling renewed US interest in
the region.

However, a changed political landscape in the
US could impact development and aid here, said
Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Center for
Human Rights.

“If there is a reduction in international
assistance, this means that some health or
education programs worldwide, or in Cambodia,
can be affected, which could be a problem,” he
said.

Rong Chhun, head of the Cambodian
Confederation of Unions, said he was
concerned there may now be less focus on
human rights. However, a push for US jobs
could be a good thing here, he said.
“If the winning party can create as many jobs as their voters want, Cambodia will benefit from it accordingly, because our big markets for garments and shoes are in the US,” he said.

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