An icon fades in Cambodia
By Sebastian Strangio

PHNOM PENH - By uprooting six wooden border markers last October along the Vietnamese border, Cambodia's opposition leader Sam Rainsy again cast himself in the familiar role of a thorn in the flesh of authority.

Earlier this year, a court sentenced Rainsy to two years in prison in absentia for uprooting the posts. He now faces additional misinformation charges that carry a possible 18 years in prison. He has been stripped of his parliamentary immunity twice in the past year.

Though his Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) remains the kingdom's biggest proponent of Western-style democracy, Rainsy's decision to go into self-imposed exile in France to continue his campaign against alleged Vietnamese incursions into Cambodian territory

has raised questions whether the 61-year-old politician has lost his direction and his party its past relevance in a fast-shifting political landscape.

Premier Hun Sen, who in 1997 ousted his long-time rival Prince Norodom Ranariddh in a bloody factional coup, has successfully consolidated his position at the center of the country's politics. Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has presided over a period of rapid economic growth - between 2004 to 2007 gross domestic product grew at an average of around 10% - and the
party's continued success at the ballot box has demonstrated that the majority of Cambodians are willing to overlook its more authoritarian tendencies in exchange for economic progress.

Meanwhile, the past year has been a tumultuous one for the SRP, which controls 26 seats in Cambodia's 123-seat National Assembly. Aside from Rainsy's border imbroglio, SRP lawmakers Mu Sochua and Ho Vann both lost their parliamentary immunity after being accused of defaming senior CPP officials. These political stand-offs earned attention in the chambers of the US Congress and the European parliament in Brussels, but it's unclear whether the SRP's antagonistic strategies have maximized its chances of leveraging Cambodia's demographic changes (as much as half the population is under 24 years of age) into medium-term political gains.

By some assessments, the party has declined since its mid-2000s peak, a trend illustrated by its failure to capture the voters who withdrew their support from the royalist Funcinpec party after it split along factional lines in 2006. "All those votes should have gone to the SRP, and they didn't," said Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.

He said the SRP's lack of concrete policies has personalized its frequent spats with the government and the lack of party vision has dragged it into various unwinnable battles with the CPP-controlled parliament. "There's no proper analysis or real policy," said Ou Virak. "If you're going to oppose something or are you in a position to offer anything, that's different?"

The SRP's campaigns against Hun Sen's authoritarianism and his cozy ties to former invader and occupier Vietnam have done little to change the country's political or economic realities. The CPP continues to control all three branches of government, as well as a large swath of the print and broadcast media.

At the 2008 polls, the CPP captured over 58% of the popular vote and notched 90 National Assembly seats - more than the two-thirds majority needed to pass laws unanimously. The SRP increased its parliamentary representation from 24 to 26 in 2008, but its share of the popular vote remained steady at around 22%.

Over the same five-year period, the vote for the royalist movement - once a powerhouse of Cambodian politics under the Funcinpec party - shrank from 20.8% of the vote to just over 10%. Most of those lost votes were usurped by the ruling CPP, despite its long-time and often heated antagonism towards the royalist party.

Another political observer said that SRP's failure to capitalize on the rift in the royalist movement represented a "huge" missed opportunity for the party and that its recent political theatrics, including the border post stunt, had "steered the party way off message".

"They talk about party leaders being persecuted on the basis of esoteric rights that many Cambodian people have very little ownership of. They've adapted to appeal to outside constituencies rather than Cambodian voters," the observer said.

Sorpong Peou, a professor of political science at Sophia University in Tokyo, concurred that the SRP's appeals to distant international organizations focused on democracy promotion and good governance have achieved little for the party domestically, where it remains "at the mercy" of Hun Sen and his ruling party.

"[The CPP] is willing to allow a degree of opposition in order to
legitimize its domination and uses this type of legitimacy to gain international support," she said. "In this sense, the opposition's appeals have little real impact on domestic politics."

To be sure, Rainsy has been down before only to bounce back. Between 2005-06 he lived in self-exile in France for a year after being stripped of his parliamentary immunity and ordered jailed for 18 months on criminal defamation charges. He only returned to Cambodia in February 2006 after recanting comments he made about Hun Sen and receiving a royal pardon from King Norodom Sihamoni.

This time, though, Rainsy faces a less accommodating international landscape given the recent diplomatic overtures to Hun Sen's government made by the United States, which has prioritized a policy of counterbalancing China's rising regional influence. For years, Rainsy benefited from the US's antagonistic approach towards the government, a policy influenced by a bloody 1997 grenade attack on a peaceful opposition rally that many claim was orchestrated by members of Hun Sen's personal bodyguard unit.

Ou Virak said that one new problem for Rainsy is that repeated petitions to international organizations - one of the few cards the leader has left to play - could be falling on increasingly deaf ears. "You can do it once or twice, but governments get fatigued, donors get fatigued ... You're running a risk of people no longer paying attention," he said. "Eventually he'll have to take it to the next level and that means facing possible imprisonment." He added: "He's no Aung San Suu Kyi. He's not going to come back."

Donor darling
When Sam Rainsy returned to Cambodia from France in 1992, he was a rising star in the royalist political firmament. A founding member of then-prince Norodom Sihanouk's FUNCINPEC party in 1981, Rainsy had risen through the ranks to become an elected parliamentarian during FUNCINPEC's stunning win in the United Nations-backed 1993 elections and was appointed minister of finance in the FUNCINPEC-CPP coalition government.

His ascent, however, was short-lived and the fall that followed set the tone for a political career that would be marked by a consistently adversarial relationship with the government. In October 1994 - just over a year after his appointment - Sam Rainsy was dismissed from his post in a major cabinet reshuffle following his criticisms of the corruption and nepotism that plagued the coalition. The following year, his continued criticisms led to his expulsion from the party and the loss of his National Assembly seat.

At the time of its founding in 1995, the Khmer Nation Party (KNP) - the SRP's predecessor - was a breath of fresh air on the Cambodian political landscape. Unlike the CPP - which secured its support through a patronage system established in the 1980s - and FUNCINPEC, which traded heavily on the prestige of the monarchy, Sam Rainsy's new party put liberal democratic principles front and center. At the time, he said his expulsion from FUNCINPEC would give him the opportunity "to mobilize millions of people" sharing the same ideals.

Even with its egalitarian bent, the SRP's constituency to this day remains overwhelmingly urban. In 2008, it won six of its 26 seats in Phnom Penh and five in urban Kampong Cham, as well as three each in Kandal and Prey Veng, both densely populated provinces close to the capital. In half of Cambodia's 24 provinces and municipalities - among them the most remote and least
populated - the party failed to win a single seat.

Caroline Hughes, an associate professor of governance studies at Murdoch University in Australia, claims that the SRP is not totally to blame for its poor electoral performances in rural areas, where the CPP used intimidation and patronage to secure votes. She said Sam Rainsy - a "donors' darling" in the early 1990s - has gradually become a more "marginal" figure because of waning international support, a rift with the Cambodian union movement and a concerted campaign of violence and intimidation against his supporters that included the bloody 1997 grenade attack.

"I don't think we can blame the SRP for the weakness of the Cambodian political opposition when the government has worked consistently to reduce the political space for any kind of organized activism on any issue," she said.

Others, however, believe the party's growth has been stunted by the erosion of its own internal democratic processes and by the constant threat of defections and government intimidation. The SRP, Ou Virak said, is "like a scared child" frightened by the threat of infiltration by the ruling party and suspicious of newcomers. "There are some good people in the party that I know that cannot move up in the ranks," he said. "There are some very good people who were left out."

For example, Ken Virak was a member of the SRP's Steering Committee who left to form his own party - the People's Power Party (PPP) - in 2007 after becoming disillusioned with the SRP's internal workings. He said the SRP had given up its role as a democratic opposition party "step by step" and that its steering committee - nominally in charge of party decision-making - no longer had real power.

"There is no democracy inside the party. Most of the decisions are made only by a minority of members who are powerful in the party and associated with Sam Rainsy," he said. "I found that before every election, members of the party always broke away because of the political decision-making and partisanship," he said.

Ken Virak said that all opposition groups, including the new Human Rights Party (HRP) and his PPP, must unite if they are to have a chance at cutting into the CPP's majority at the next national election, which must be held by 2013. But a united opposition is still a distant threat to CPP dominance: proposed mergers between the SRP and HRP and two remaining royalist parties have all foundered on personal disagreements between their leaders.

Political family
Born in Phnom Penh in 1949, Rainsy's formative years were influenced by Cambodia's rough and tumble politics. His father, Sam Sary, was a key member of Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum government, but fell from grace after he was implicated in the so-called Bangkok Plot of 1959, an attempt to topple the government with the support of Thailand's right-wing Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat.

Sam Sary disappeared in 1962 and was presumed killed, possibly by the government. Shortly afterwards, Rainsy's mother, In Em, took the remaining family members to live in France, where he was educated and remained for the next three decades. In a recent Phnom Penh Post interview, Rainsy described his father's death as a "traumatizing" experience, but said that his political views permeated the family and influenced
the trajectory of his own political development.

Certain pivotal events in Europe, including the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, were topics of conversation at the dinner table and went some way to forming the ideals that grew into the SRP's blend of liberal internationalism with appeals to Khmer nationalism.

"When it came to Southeast Asia, my father was in favor of a strict neutrality - that Cambodia should not move closer to the communist world," Rainsy said. "This has marked my background and my conviction that communism is oppressive - that freedom is essential and that we have to fight for [it]."

Rainsy said that despite being founded largely on his own initiative in 1995, the KNP - renamed the SRP in 1998 because of legal disputes over the KNP name - had grown into an "organization of its own" linking Cambodia with Khmer communities abroad. He also downplayed his role as the party's figurehead, referring to it as an "anachronistic" notion.

"If it was a one-man show, the show would have stopped a long time ago given all the problems that we've been facing," he said.

Rainsy said that the SRP was the only party in Cambodia that holds organized elections from the grassroots, a system that was in strict opposition to the CPP's centrally controlled networks. "They appoint their cadres - their apparatchiks - at the grassroots, but we are the only party that has organized elections," he said. Similarly, the "loss" of the former Funcinpec vote was largely "due to intimidation and vote-buying in non-transparent elections", Rainsy said - a claim the opposition has made consistently since the July 2008 election.

Asked how the party might erode the CPP's entrenched network of patronage and make electoral headway in rural areas, Rainsy said that current and future demographic changes were swinging voters towards the SRP - a factor reflected in the party's recent formation of a new youth congress. "It will take less time than one might imagine now because of the progress of technology, information, communication and education," he said. "History is accelerating."

Koul Panha, executive director of the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia, a local election monitor, said Rainsy retains substantial political capital for taking a principled stance against corruption in the 1990s and maintaining it has a party platform ever since. He believes the party's main challenge is improving its public relations.

"I think he still has that credibility. He resigned from a key position in government and showed he is that kind of politician," he said. "The problem is how to communicate that credibility to the people." It's likely to remain a problem for the party as long as Rainsy campaigns on issues that appear to have more resonance with foreign audiences than with local voters.

Sebastian Strangio is a reporter for the Phnom Penh Post in Cambodia.

(Copyright 2010 Asia Times Online (Holdings) Ltd. All rights reserved. Please contact us about sales, syndication and republishing.)
Everest Teambuilding  www.everestteambuilding.com
Fun teambuilding in Asia with results you can measure today

Phnom Penh  www.TripAdvisor.com
Find Hotels, Compare Rates, Read Reviews & More. Try TripAdvisor!

Global Government Events  www.Terrapinn.com
Senior level conferences for the Public Sector worldwide

Full Moon Party, Thailand  www.fulmoonpartykohphang.com
Coming Soon - 19 Feb & 19 Mar 2011. 150+ Resorts. Prices from 250 Baht!