



## **Finding a Way Forward for Cambodia After Sham Elections**

By Sam Rainsy

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Hun Sen's bogus election held on July 29 throws down the gauntlet to the international community to prove that democracy is possible in Cambodia.

The only party that could have defeated the government, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), had been banned after its excellent showing in the 2017 local elections. In the national vote, the ruling Cambodian People's Party bribed and intimidated people to go and vote, inflated the published turnout when most of them refused, and then awarded itself all of the national assembly seats, 125 out of 125. For the first time in the 25 years since the elections organized by the United Nations in 1993, Cambodia lacks a legitimate government recognized by the international community. The country has returned to Communist dictatorship; even the pretence of political pluralism has gone.

The United States, the European Union, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the UK, and Sweden refused to send any observers to the election. There was nothing to observe. The farce was a violation of both Cambodia's constitution and an international treaty, the Paris Peace Agreement of 1991. The absence of Japan, which played a key part in the UN-supervised transition to democracy in the early 1990s and has been Cambodia's largest donor since, spoke volumes.

Hun Sen is willing to bet that support from China – alone – will be enough to keep his regime alive. It's not the first time that China has propped up a Communist dictator in Cambodia. This has not proved to be a model for stable governance. If it is in China's interests to change its mind about supporting Hun Sen, then it inevitably will. In that sense, Hun Sen has already lost control of the situation. The plan is to allow China to decide. There is no plan B.

The reaction of the international community is critical in this context. A start has been made. The US said in August that it's expanding visa restrictions on individuals responsible for "anti-democratic" actions in the run-up to the election. Other countries should follow suit, and the scope of the sanctions should be extended.

The regime's contempt for its erstwhile Western allies has become even plainer. The head of Cambodia's tax department, Kong Vibol, has amassed a multi-million dollar fortune which he has stashed away in Australia. In August, Global Witness started a campaign for sanctions against four allies of the regime accused of human rights abuses, environmental destruction and corruption. These are logging baron Try Pheap, Ly Yong Phat, Mong Reththy and Lao Meng

Khin. The assets of those who have benefited from a corrupt and authoritarian regime must be frozen in whichever jurisdiction they have been hidden.

Tariff-free market access for Cambodia was originally granted by the West as recognition of the country's transition to democracy. If the US and the European Union ended these policies, Cambodia's exporters would face an estimated US\$676 million per year in tariffs. China will not be picking up the slack. Beijing invests in Cambodia, but there are no markets in China for Cambodian goods. The end of tariff-free markets would destroy Cambodia's textiles industry. Nobody wants to see that happen, but Hun Sen's recklessness has made it a real possibility.

The prime minister is treating Cambodia as a personal fiefdom that can one day be handed over to one of his sons. However, the international community since the early 1990s has accumulated a huge sunk cost in backing Cambodian democracy – a cost made up of taxpayers money. Hun Sen is being unrealistic if he expects that cost to be written off.

Hard-hitting visa sanctions and asset freezes against a much broader range of beneficiaries of the corrupt regime, implemented in a coordinated way by the West, have the best chance of bringing Hun Sen to his senses and avoiding the nightmare scenario of export tariffs. The regime and its cronies need access to foreign education systems for their families, and foreign bank accounts to hide the fortunes they have amassed. Banks must cooperate in locating and freezing these accounts, and stop lending to an illegitimate regime that relies on intimidation, violence and murder to sustain itself.

A vicious circle rests in the fact that the use of violence alienates the population from the government and isolates the government from the international community. So the government feels more threatened and resorts again to the only methods that seem to work. The alternative path of dialogue with the opposition has always been open, and remains open now.

The international community must pressure Hun Sen to release jailed CNRP leader Kem Sokha and all of Cambodia's political prisoners, reinstate the CNRP and hold a real election. The Malaysian election showed that seemingly permanent regimes are finished as soon as they lose popular support. Malaysia shows also that corrupt governments can and will be bought to account through the courts. Cambodians deserve the right to decide their own destiny. The iron grip in which Hun Sen holds the country means that they are unable to exercise that right alone.

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