

# Cambodian Commune and National Elections

## Insights and Lessons

*Submitted to:*

**Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD)**

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## Acronyms

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ASEAN:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CALD:	Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats
COMFREL:	Committee for Free and Fair Elections
CNLP:	Cambodia National Love Party
CNRP:	Cambodian National Rescue Party
CP:	The Candlelight Party
CPP:	Cambodian People's Party
FF:	Future Forum
FGD:	Focus Group Discussion
GDP:	Grassroots Democratic Party
IDI:	In-depth Interview
KNP:	The Kamuchea Niyum Party
KNUP:	Khmer National United Party
LEMNA:	Law on Elections of Members of the National Assembly
NEC:	National Election Committee
RCAF:	Royal Cambodian Armed Forces
RFA:	Radio Free Asia

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## Introduction

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The 2022 Commune Elections and the 2023 General Elections are taking place at a pivotal moment in Cambodia's pandemic recovery process and in the context of Cambodia's chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While the Cambodian government has been lauded as one of the more successful states to handle the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia, the economy contracted by 3.1 percent in 2020.<sup>1</sup> The profitable tourism industry and the garment and construction sectors were particularly impacted, with international tourist visas being suspended until November 2021 and as many as half of all factories suspending production in 2020 due to low demand and COVID-19 restrictions and outbreaks.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the pandemic, the garment sector employed over 800,000 workers, mostly women.<sup>3</sup> As ASEAN chair, Cambodia is prioritizing the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the elections are being held as major changes have been taking place in domestic politics. The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) is preparing for an eventual leadership transition, and former members of the, now dissolved, Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) have been facing trial or live in exile. The Supreme Court dissolved the CNRP in the run-up to the 2018 General Elections and banned its members from partaking in politics for five years.<sup>5</sup> The 2022 Commune Elections are thus proceeding without the CNRP, which received 43.83 percent of the electoral vote in the

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF and the World Food Programme, *COVID-19: Socio-Economic Impact Assessment* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: UNICEF and the World Food Programme, 2021), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Sabina Lawreniuk, "A Year On: Economic and Health Crises Converge in Cambodia's Garment Industry," University of Nottingham, 2021, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/vision/a-year-on-economic-and-health-crises-converge-in-cambodias-garment-industry>.

<sup>3</sup> Matt Bloomberg and Mech Dara, "Will Cambodia's Garment Sector Rebound After 'Horror Year'?" *Reuters*, 18 December 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-garment-workers-feature-trfn/will-cambodias-garment-sector-rebound-after-horror-year-idUSKBN28S007>.

<sup>4</sup> ASEAN, "Phnom Penh Statement on the Post-COVID-19 Socio-Economic Recovery," 26 November 2021, <https://asean.org/phnom-penh-statement-on-the-post-covid-19-socio-economic-recovery/>.

<sup>5</sup> Prak Chan Thul and Amy Sawitta Lefevre, "Cambodia's Main Opposition Party Dissolved by Supreme Court," *Reuters*, 16 November 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-politics/cambodias-main-opposition-party-dissolved-by-supreme-court-idUSKBN1DG1BO>.

2017 Commune Elections.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, rehabilitated members of the CNRP have been allowed to join political parties for the upcoming elections, requiring a pardon from His Majesty Norodom Sihamoni.<sup>7</sup> On 24 December 2021, the CPP endorsed Hun Manet – the commander of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and son of Prime Minister Hun Sen – as its future prime ministerial candidate.<sup>8</sup>

The upcoming elections consequently are once more viewed as a litmus test for both the ruling party and the disbanded CNRP, which has fractured into several smaller parties competing in the 2022 Commune Elections. The knowledge toolkit is a timely endeavor to provide insight into the upcoming elections. Following a background on elections in Cambodia and an explanation of the methodology, this toolkit delves into an overview of the parties competing in the June 2022 elections. The last two sections present the findings from interviews with experts on the 2017/2018 and 2022/2023 election processes and from focus groups on the perspectives of young, educated Cambodians on the upcoming elections.

This report supports collective understanding as to the current challenges and opportunities within the election cycle, with a particular focus on the view of voters at this time. It is a tool for all relevant political, commentary, and research stakeholders.

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<sup>6</sup> Ananth Baliga, “Breaking: Final NEC Commune Elections Result Released,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 25 June 2017, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/politics/breaking-final-nec-commune-elections-results-released>.

<sup>7</sup> Khuon Narim, “Renewed Candlelight Party a Sign of Political Split between Former CNRP Leaders, Analysts Say,” *Camboja News*, 9 November 2021, <https://cambojanews.com/renewed-candlelight-party-a-sign-of-political-split-between-former-cnrp-leaders-analysts-say/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Cambodia’s Ruling Party Endorses PM’s son as Future Leader,” *Reuters*, 24 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cambodias-ruling-party-endorses-pm-hun-sens-son-future-leader-2021-12-24/>.

# 1. Background: Elections in Cambodia

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The Paris Peace Agreement of 1991 stipulates that the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) organize and supervise a “free and fair” national election, which was an unprecedented endeavor for both the UN and a country that had been engaged in prolonged civil and interstate conflicts. Between 23 and 28 May 1993, nearly 90 percent of registered voters participated in the UN-mandated national election.<sup>9</sup> Notably, the high voter turnout at that time demonstrates the newfound importance of the civic duty to cast a ballot and elect the political party of choice for the Cambodian population. While the Front Uni National Pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique et Coopératif (Funcinpec) won the majority of the popular vote (45.47 percent), the CPP received 38.23 percent of the total vote.<sup>10</sup>

Following a dispute over the election results, a fragile coalition government was formed between the two parties, with Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen acting as first and second prime ministers respectively. This power-sharing arrangement came to a violent end in 1997 when the loyalist armed forces of Funcinpec and the CPP clashed, and Prince Ranariddh was exiled. A year later, around 90 percent of registered voters once again turned out to vote in the first national elections since UNTAC, with the CPP coming out on top this time.<sup>11</sup> Despite the controversy surrounding the fairness of the 1998 General Elections, there was a low level of violence and a high voter turnout.<sup>12</sup> After making even further gains in the 2008 General Elections, the CPP unexpectedly conceded 22 seats in the National Assembly to the CNRP in 2013.<sup>13</sup> These events would not be repeated in 2018

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations, “Cambodia – UNTAC: Background,” <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/past/untacbackgr1.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Sothirak Pou, Bradley Murg, Charadine Pich and Courtney Weatherby, *The Paris Peace Agreements: Looking Back and Moving Forward* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2021), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Sorpong Peou, “The Cambodian Elections of 1998 and Beyond: Democracy in the Making?” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 20, no. 3 (1998): p. 295.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> “Big Opposition Gains,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 29 July 2013, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/big-opposition-gains>.

when the CPP consolidated its power through sweeping all parliamentary seats in an election that excluded the recently banned CNRP.<sup>14</sup>

In accordance with the 2001 Law on Commune/ Sangkat Administrative Management, local elections were held for the first time in 2002 as part of decentralization reforms and stated efforts to strengthen grassroots support to democracy.<sup>15</sup> The commune level of government controls the village administration and is below the province and district levels. Political candidates are elected through a system of proportional representation. While the CPP won slightly more than 60 percent of the total vote in 2002, this was reduced to 50.76 percent in the 2017 Commune Elections, signifying a major turning point for a party that typically garnered strong rural support.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the CNRP improved their performance compared to the 2012 Commune Elections, receiving 43.83 percent of the total vote.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, voter turnout in 2017 was high for local elections at 85 percent of registered voters.

The 2022 Commune Elections are the first without the CNRP, and after the CPP consolidated its power in 2018, raising questions over the democratic standards of the elections and the policy preferences of voters. It is also taking place with an NEC that has been entirely composed of CPP-affiliated members since the ruling party captured all parliamentary seats in 2018.

The NEC was established in the 1997 Law on Elections of Members of the National Assembly (LEMNA).<sup>18</sup> It is “responsible for planning, organizing and managing the election

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<sup>14</sup> Sorpong Peou, “Cambodia in 2018,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2019): p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Slocomb, “Commune Elections in Cambodia: 1981 Foundations and 2002 Reformulations,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2004): p. 463.

<sup>16</sup> Vannarith Chheang, “Cambodian Power Shift in 2018?” *ISEAS Perspective* no. 53 (2017): p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> “History of NEC,” The Kingdom of Cambodia National Election Committee, <https://www.nec.gov.kh/english/content/history-nec>; Meeh Dara and Andrew Nachemson, “Breaking: National Assembly Passes Election Law Amendments to Allow CNRP Seat Distribution,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 16 October 2017, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/breaking-national-assembly-passes-election-law-amendments-allow-cnrp-seat-distribution>.

in the whole country,”<sup>19</sup> including ensuring that the elections are free and fair and conducted according to the principles of a multi-party democracy. In the wake of the 2013 General Elections, the National Assembly reformed the NEC through the Law on Organization and Function of the National Election Committee. The aim of the reforms to the NEC was to ensure that it was a bipartisan institution.<sup>20</sup> Since 2015, the NEC is composed of nine members. Four members are chosen from the party leading Royal Government of Cambodia, and four members are chosen from other parties in the National Assembly. The ninth member is agreed upon by all the parties in the National Assembly.<sup>21</sup>

In June 2021, Prach Chan was nominated by the CPP and subsequently appointed by the National Assembly as the new chairman of the NEC.<sup>22</sup> A senior member of the CPP, he is the former governor of Battambang and Tboung Khmum provinces. The lack of independent members of the NEC has invited criticisms about the impartiality of the body, including from former members of the CNRP and members of civil society organizations. For instance, in a comment in the *Khmer Times*, the executive director of the Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia questioned the neutrality of the NEC given the members’ affiliation with the CPP.<sup>23</sup> As a result, much attention is on the actions of the NEC during these elections.

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<sup>19</sup> “The Competent of NEC,” The Kingdom of Cambodia National Election Committee, <https://www.nec.gov.kh/english/content/competent-nec>.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Carmichael, “New Cambodian Election Laws Could Undermine Democracy,” *Voice of America*, 19 March 2015, <https://www.voanews.com/a/rights-group-says-new-cambodian-election-laws-could-undermine-democracy-/2686725.html>.

<sup>21</sup> “History of NEC.”

<sup>22</sup> Buth Reaskmey Kongkea, “Chan Confirmed as New NEC Chairman by National Assembly,” *Khmer Times*, 25 June 2021, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50880675/chan-confirmed-as-new-nec-chairman-by-national-assembly/>.

<sup>23</sup> Yin Soeum, “NEC Dismisses Claims of Unfair Elections,” *Khmer Times*, 4 August 2021, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50908070/nec-dismisses-claims-of-unfair-elections/>.



## 2. Research Methodology

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Information on the procedure of the 2022 Commune Elections and the contesting political parties was gathered from a desk review of English-language reports, statements, and news articles, including from the *Khmer Times*, *Voice of Democracy*, *The Phnom Penh Post*, and *Radio Free Asia*. In order to understand the perspectives of the Cambodian population on the upcoming elections, four in-depth interviews (IDIs) with experts knowledgeable about the election process in Cambodia and two focus group discussions (FGDs) with young Cambodians were conducted in April 2022. The purpose of the interviews was to gather expert evaluations on the electoral process outcomes of the 2017/2018 and upcoming elections. Interviews lasted around one hour. A representative from the NEC was not contacted because the views of the NEC are documented in the media, such as in a March 2021 interview with the Deputy Secretary General of the NEC in *The Phnom Penh Post*.<sup>24</sup>

The FGDs were conducted with young, educated Cambodians in Phnom Penh. Two-thirds of Cambodians are under the age of 30, and many young Cambodians were not old enough to be part of the movement during the 2013 General Elections that propelled the CNRP to significant gains in the National Assembly. This makes it especially important to make sense of their policy interests and perspectives on the upcoming elections, as well as on the importance of voting as an instrument civic participation.

The FDGs included a total of 20 participants who were either university students or had already graduated. The focus groups lasted between two to three hours and included two facilitators and a moderator.

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<sup>24</sup> Nov Sivutha, “NEC Som Sorida on Election Basics, Criticisms of Kingdom’s Voting Process,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 10 March 2022, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/necs-som-sorida-election-basics-criticisms-kingdoms-voting-process>.

### 3. The Contesting Political Parties in the Commune Elections

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17 political parties are contesting the 2022 Commune Election, including several that were formed in the wake of the legal dissolution of the CNRP and with the aim of enacting political change through free and fair elections. In the last months, the leaders of six parties had been in discussions to merge ahead of the commune elections, though ultimately concerns over a lack of resources and sufficient time to carry out a merger won out.<sup>25</sup> While these parties are nevertheless uniting over a common objective of electoral reforms in the short-term, merger talks will continue in view of the 2023 General Elections. These discussions have been primarily among former members of the CNRP, including the Candlelight Party (CP). The CPP, the CP, Funcinpec, and the Khmer National United Party (KNUP) are competing in all 25 provinces.<sup>26</sup>

The CP is the only opposition party contesting in almost all communes, fielding 23,367 candidates in comparison to the 28,000 candidates for the CPP. Funcinpec and the KNUP respectively are competing in 688 and 617 communes. However, the NEC rejected 150 commune council candidates from the CP in Phnom Penh (116), Kampong Cham (24), and Pursat (10) in early April.<sup>27</sup> Candidates for other non-ruling party candidates, such as from the Khmer Will Party, the Beehive Social Democratic Party, have also been removed in recent weeks.<sup>28</sup> While the CP has voiced concern that these are politically motivated actions, the NEC spokesman Hang Puthea stated that these candidates had not filled out their own election applications.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, only 31 percent of registered candidates

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<sup>25</sup> “Six Opposition Parties Mull Alliance to Challenge Cambodia’s Ruling Party,” *Radio Free Asia*, 9 February 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/alliance-0209202234300.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Ananth Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections,” *Voice of Democracy*, 8 March 2022, <https://vodenglish.news/guide-to-political-parties-contesting-the-2022-commune-election/>.

<sup>27</sup> Sorn Sarath, “More Candlelight Commune Candidates Cut From Election,” *Cambodia News*, 5 April 2022, <https://cambojanews.com/more-candlelight-party-commune-candidates-cut-from-election/>.

<sup>28</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

for the elections are women, a slight increase from 2017.<sup>30</sup> The following sections are an overview of the contesting political parties based on information available up to May 2022.

### ***The Cambodian People's Party (CPP)***

The CPP has its origins in the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party, which was founded in 1951 as a communist movement.<sup>31</sup> It was transformed into the CPP in October 1991, embracing an approach of pragmatism and nationalism. Ruling since 1985, Prime Minister Hun Sen is currently the longest-serving leader in Southeast Asia. Following the death of the President of the Senate Chea Sim, he took over the presidency of the CPP in 2015. Over the last few months, the prime minister has given conflicting answers as to how long he plans to lead the country.<sup>32</sup> In December 2021, the CPP officially endorsed the nomination of his eldest son Hun Manet as the party's future prime ministerial candidate.<sup>33</sup> Since then, the commander of RCAF Hun Manet has been meeting with foreign dignitaries and even met with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Japan.<sup>34</sup> The 2022/2023 elections are thus taking place with questions surrounding the timeline and smoothness of the CPP's leadership transition.

The CPP currently only lacks control of a single commune in Cambodia. Out of 28,000 candidates, 26% are women.<sup>35</sup> Earlier in 2022, the CPP released an "11-point manifesto" for its campaign in the commune elections. According to the spokesperson of the CPP, Suos Yara, the manifesto covers the central policy issues of "education,

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<sup>30</sup> Mech Dara, "Women Candidates Only 31 Percent Among 82,000 Registered for Commune Elections," *Voice of Democracy*, 8 March 2022, <https://vodenglish.news/women-candidates-only-31-percent-among-82000-registered-for-commune-election/>.

<sup>31</sup> Cheunboran Chanborey, "The Cambodian People's Party: History and Political Transformation," *Asian Vision Institute Perspective* no. 3 (2019): p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Astrid Noren-Nilsson, "Hun Sen Future-Proofs Cambodia's Politics," *East Asia Forum*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/01/21/hun-sen-future-proofs-cambodias-politics/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Cambodia's Ruling Party Endorses PM's son as Future Leader."

<sup>34</sup> Sao Phal Nisely, "Hun Manet's Japan Visit: Tokyo Prepares for Young Blood in Cambodia," *Cambodianess*, 19 February 2022, <https://cambodianess.com/article/hun-manets-japan-visit-tokyo-prepares-for-young-blood-in-cambodia>.

<sup>35</sup> Baliga, "Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections."

agriculture, public health and employment.”<sup>36</sup> This includes improving access to public services such as in the health and infrastructure sectors, strengthening education standards in secondary and high schools, and promoting democracy at the grassroots level. The manifesto will be distributed during the campaign period in the weeks prior to the commune elections.

### ***The Candlelight Party (CP)***

Founded in 1995, this party was known as the Sam Rainsy Party and the Khmer Nation Party until merging with other parties to form the CNRP in 2012.<sup>37</sup> Sam Rainsy has been exiled in France since being sentenced to 25 years in prison on the charge of attempting to overthrow the government, which some have denounced as politically motivated. Another former president of the CNRP, Kem Sokha, has been under court supervision since 2018 and distanced himself from the CP with a public statement in November 2021.<sup>38</sup> The current president of the CP is Thach Seta, a former CNRP member who was pardoned by His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni in April 2021.<sup>39</sup> Since its re-activation, the CP has managed to establish offices in every province and the president has visited all provinces.

In April, Thach Seta explained that the party would largely base its platform on the policies of the disbanded CNRP.<sup>40</sup> In 2017, the CNRP ran on a platform focusing on issues such as improving the livelihoods of residents through, for example, protecting

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<sup>36</sup> Ben Sokhean, “CPP to Register 28,257 Candidates in 1,652 Communes Across the Country,” *Khmer Times*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501028450/cpp-to-register-28257-candidates-in-1652-communes-across-the-country/>.

<sup>37</sup> Eugene Whong, “Opposition Candlelight Party Gains Steam in Cambodia in Shadow of Crackdown,” *Radio Free Asia*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/opposition-candlelight-02072022084910.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Ananth Baliga and Ouch Sony, “CNRP Rift in the Open as Kem Sokha Distances Himself from Rainsy,” *Voice of Democracy*, 29 November 2021, <https://vodenglish.news/cnrp-rift-out-in-the-open-as-kem-sokha-distances-himself-from-rainsy/>.

<sup>39</sup> “Thach Seta, a Former CNRP Lawmaker Now Rehabilitated and Allowed to Be Involved in Politics Again,” *Khmer Times*, 13 April 2021, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50838060/thach-setha-a-former-cnrp-lawmaker-now-rehabilitated-and-allowed-to-be-involved-in-politics-again/>.

<sup>40</sup> Ouch Sony and Ananth Baliga, “Thach Seta Interview: ‘I am Asking People to Unite Behind the Candlelight Party,’” *Voice of Democracy*, 4 April 2022, <https://vodenglish.news/thach-setha-interview-i-am-asking-people-to-unite-behind-the-candlelight-party/>.

property laws and enhancing the provision of public services.<sup>41</sup> 23 percent of their candidates are women.<sup>42</sup> There are a few reports of incidents involving CP candidates, such as the head of the CP in Pailin province being charged with defamation and incitement after he filed a complaint about a village chief interfering with his monitoring activities.<sup>43</sup>

### **Funcinpec**

Prince Norodom Sihanouk founded the royalist group as an armed resistance force in 1981, with Prince Norodom Ranariddh leading the party in the 1990s until his removal from power in 1997.<sup>44</sup> In contrast to its success in 1993, Funcinpec did not win any seats in the 2013 General Elections, losing ground to the CNRP.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the last time it won a position at the commune level was in 2012. Although Prince Ranariddh was negotiating a merger with the KNUP prior to his death in 2021, this merger has not materialized in the run-up to the commune elections. Following an internal dispute about the party's next leader, Prince Norodom Chakravuth, the eldest son of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, was elected as the president of Funcinpec in February 2022.

The party is focusing on “national unity, national reconciliation, cooperation with partner parties and a neutral and nonaligned policy.”<sup>46</sup> It aims to win ten seats in the National Assembly in the 2023 elections. It is contesting in 25 provinces and 688 communes, and 38 percent of its candidates are women.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “Cambodian Communal Elections, 2017: Political Platform of Cambodia National Rescue Party,” *Radio Free Asia*, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/special/cambodia-commune-election2017/cnrp.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

<sup>43</sup> Mech Dara, “Candlelight Party’s Pailin Chief Hit with Two Lawsuits,” *Voice of Democracy*, 5 April 2022, <https://vodenglish.news/candlelight-partys-pailin-chief-hit-with-two-lawsuits/>.

<sup>44</sup> Sorpong Peou, “Interparty and Intraparty Factionalism in Cambodian Politics,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2020): p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> Ouch Sony, “Funcinpec Hopes for Best as Ranariddh’s Son Takes Over as President,” *Voice of Democracy*, 9 February 2022, <https://vodenglish.news/funcinpec-hopes-for-best-as-ranariddhs-son-takes-over-as-president/>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

## ***Khmer National United Party (KNUP)***

The president of the KNUP is Nhek Bun Chhay, who is a former general for Funcinpec. In 2017, he was charged with drug production and procurement of precursors in a case linked to his former advisor who was found in the possession of drugs, which were dropped in late March 2022.<sup>48</sup> With new members joining from other political parties, the party aims to compete in both the 2022 and 2023 elections. It held an extraordinary congress in January 2022, which included electing new members to its steering committee and implementing policies such as not forming alliances with other political parties. After a review, the Ministry of Interior approved the procedures of the extra-ordinary congress in March 2022.<sup>49</sup>

Candidates of the KNUP aim to represent everyone in the commune regardless of party affiliation. In addition to promoting freedom of speech and of expression, the president stated that the party is running on a platform focusing on “resolving land conflicts and court issues, promoting health and education, and finding a stable market for the people to have better livelihood.”<sup>50</sup> In addition to the promotion of freedom of speech and expression, this includes working towards eliminating corruption and injustice.<sup>51</sup> It is fielding the highest percentage of female candidates amongst the parties competing in all provinces, at 44 percent.<sup>52</sup>

## ***Political Parties Competing in Fewer Provinces***

Given that the rest of the political parties are competing in fewer provinces and that there is less information available on them, they are detailed in the following table. According

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<sup>48</sup> Mech Dara, “Former General Nhek Bun Chhay Cleared of Drug Charges,” *Voice of Democracy*, 31 March 2022, <https://vodenglish.news/former-general-nhek-bun-chhay-cleared-of-drug-charges/>.

<sup>49</sup> Soth Koemsoeun, “Ministry Gives KNUP the Nod to Carry Out Political Parties,” *Khmer Times*, 15 March 2022, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501041190/ministry-gives-knup-the-nod-to-carry-out-political-activities/>.

<sup>50</sup> Yin Soeum, “Parties Prepare Platforms and Candidates for Local Elections,” *Khmer Times*, 11 February 2022, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501022924/parties-prepare-platforms-and-candidates-for-local-elections/>.

<sup>51</sup> Yin Soeum, “KNUP Holds Party Congress, Sets Policy,” *Khmer Times*, 26 January 2022, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501013259/knup-holds-party-congress-sets-policy/>.

<sup>52</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

to the election guide published on *Voice of Democracy*, 13 additional parties are participating in the 2022 Commune Elections.<sup>53</sup>

**Table 2: Smaller Parties**

Political Party	Details
<b><i>Cambodia National Love Party (CNLP)</i></b>	Two former CNRP members, Chiv Kata and Kang Kimhak, established the Cambodia National Love Party in January 2020 after requesting and being granted rehabilitation from the government. <sup>54</sup> The Vice-President of the party, Kheuy Sinoeurn, explained that the party would continue carry on the platform of the CNRP. The CNLP is contesting in 18 provinces and 329, with 41 percent of candidates being women. <sup>55</sup>
<b><i>Grassroots Democratic Party (GDP)</i></b>	Former leaders of non-government organizations formed the GDP in 2015 with the objectives of reducing corruption and increasing social justice. <sup>56</sup> In 2018, Yang Saing Koma, the founder and president of the Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture, was elected as the party's candidate for prime minister. <sup>57</sup> He is a co-founder of the GDP. As the name suggests, the party seeks to promote a grassroots and decentralized approach to democracy in contrast to the prevailing model of centralized power. To promote its bottom-up approach, it holds local meetings to determine the policies that the party should pursue in its national campaign.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Vann Vichar, "Former CNRP Lawmakers Announce New 'Love' Party," *Voice of Democracy*, 2 January 2020, <https://vodenglish.news/former-cnrp-lawmakers-announce-new-love-party/>.

<sup>55</sup> Baliga, "Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections."

<sup>56</sup> Hul Reaksmey, "New Grassroots Political Party Announced," *Voice of America*, 3 August 2015, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/new-grassroots-political-announced/2896647.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Mech Dara, "Saing Koma Voted to Lead the Grassroots Democratic Party," *The Phnom Penh Post*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/saing-koma-voted-lead-grassroots-democratic-party>.

	In the 2018 General Elections, it ran on a platform of administrative reform, universal healthcare, pensions, and a student loan program. <sup>58</sup> It faced criticisms from former members of the CNRP for participating in the 2018 elections. Nevertheless, Yang Saing Koma argued that it was important to cultivate “a democratic spirit” amongst Cambodians. <sup>59</sup> In the 2022 Commune Elections, the GDP is contesting the election in 15 provinces and 34 communes. A third of its 446 candidates are women. <sup>60</sup>
<b><i>Khmer Will Party</i></b>	Having contested in the 2018 General Elections, this is the first time that the Khmer Will Party will participate in a commune election. In 2019, a senior official from the CNRP, Kong Korm, announced that he would be joining the party and invited other former CNRP members to join as well. <sup>61</sup> The president of the party is also a former member of the CNRP, Kong Monika. It is competing in 10 provinces and 65 communes and 49 percent of the party's fielded candidates are women. <sup>62</sup>
<b><i>The Kamuchea Niyum Party (KNP)</i></b>	The KNP is another party formed by a former CNRP official and was officially validated by the Ministry of Interior in November 2021. <sup>63</sup> The president, Yen Ponhearith, is considered as an ally to

<sup>58</sup> Aun Chhengpor, “Against the Odds, Opposition Party Seeks to Spread Democracy “Like Lemongrass”,” *Voice of America*, 2 March 2018, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/against-the-odds-opposition-party-seeks-to-spread-democracy-like-lemongrass/4277303.html>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

<sup>61</sup> “Top News: Former CNRP Senior Official Urges Other Members to Consider Khmer Will Party a New Home,” *Fresh News International*, 16 January 2019, <http://en.freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/localnews/12663-2019-01-16-14-29-33.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

<sup>63</sup> Ben Sokhean, “Kampucheaniyum Party Garners Support from Grassroots for Upcoming Elections,” *Khmer Times*, 1 December 2021, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50980057/kampucheaniyum-party-garners-support-from-grassroots-for-upcoming-elections/>.



	Kem Sokha. Its “pro-democracy platform” includes respecting human rights and restoring declining freedoms in the country. <sup>64</sup> It is contesting in 10 provinces and 39 communes and 227 of its 641 candidates are women. <sup>65</sup>
<b>Cambodia Nationality Party</b>	The Cambodia Nationality Party is contesting in 21 provinces and 287 communes, with 47 percent of fielded candidates being women. <sup>66</sup> In the 2017 Commune Elections, the party’s platform included seeking social peace and sustainable development, promoting solidarity, and adhering to Buddhist teachings. <sup>67</sup>
<b>Cambodian Youth Party</b>	The president of the Cambodian Youth Party, Pich Sros, called for the dissolution of the CNRP with an official complaint to the Ministry of Interior in October 2017. <sup>68</sup> The party was formed in 2015 to help address problems facing Cambodia’s youth, such as unemployment and education. <sup>69</sup> The party is competing in 18 provinces and 119 communes and 49 percent of its 1,812 fielded candidates are women. <sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Khuon Narim, “Uneven Playing Field as Splintered Opposition Parties Prepare for 2022 Commune Elections,” *Cambodia News*, 16 December 2021, <https://cambojanews.com/uneven-playing-field-as-splintered-opposition-parties-prepare-for-2022-commune-elections/>.

<sup>65</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> “Cambodian Communal Elections, 2017: Platform of Cambodian National Party,” *Radio Free Asia*, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/special/cambodia-commune-election2017/cnp.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Nachemson and Soth Koemsoeun, “Cambodian Youth Party Launches Bid to End CNRP,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 5 October 2017, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodian-youth-party-launches-bid-end-cnrp>.

<sup>69</sup> Chea Takihiro, “Cambodian Youth Party,” *Khmer Times*, 24 December 2015, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/33962/cambodian-youth-party/>.

<sup>70</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

<b>Cambodia Reform Party</b>	<p>The Cambodia Reform Party was established in 2021 and is led by former CNRP members Pol Ham and Ou Chanrath.<sup>71</sup> Both have been closely linked to Kem Sokha. It is also proposing a similar platform to the CNRP, though financial constraints have limited their campaigns. The party is competing in 11 provinces and 50 communes and 35 percent of its candidates are women.<sup>72</sup> Following threats, two candidates withdrew their applications in March 2022 in Chup commune.<sup>73</sup></p>
<b>Khmer United Party</b>	<p>The Khmer United Party was formerly known as the Kem Ley Party and was registered in 2018 by Kuch Ly and the brother of the late Kem Lay, Kem Rithisith.<sup>74</sup> It had to remove Kem Ley's name from the party name to be compliant with the 2017 amendments to the Law on Political Parties. When it was founded in 2015, the Kem Ley Party aimed to promote "pluralistic intraparty democracy" and foster a network of independent parties.<sup>75</sup> It is competing in 9 provinces and 33 provinces, and the highest proportion of its fielded candidates are women (53%).<sup>76</sup></p>

<sup>71</sup> Sorn Sarath, "Newly Established Cambodia Reform Party Seeks Support of Former CNRP Ahead of Commune Elections," *Cambodia*, 25 May 2021, <https://cambojanews.com/newly-established-cambodia-reform-party-seeks-support-of-former-cnrm-ahead-of-the-commune-elections/>.

<sup>72</sup> Baliga, "Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections."

<sup>73</sup> Nhim Sokhorn, "Cambodia Reform Party Candidates in Tbong Khmum Withdraw, Citing Threats," *Voice of Democracy*, 4 March 2022, <https://vodenglish.news/cambodia-reform-party-candidates-in-tbong-khmum-withdraw-citing-threats/>.

<sup>74</sup> Niem Chheng and Ananth Baliga, "Newly Registered Khmer United Party Pledges Support for CNRM," *The Phnom Penh Post*, 28 March 2018, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/newly-registered-khmer-united-party-pledges-support-cnrm>.

<sup>75</sup> Bennett Murray, "Kem Ley to Form National Party," *The Phnom Penh Post*, 24 June 2015, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/kem-ley-form-national-party>.

<sup>76</sup> Baliga, "Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections."

<b>Beehive Social Democratic Party</b>	After resigning from the Beehive Social Democratic Party due to a poor performance in the 2017 Commune Elections, Mam Sonando re-joined the party as president only a year later. <sup>77</sup> During his career as a journalist, he was jailed between 2003 and 2005 and was accused of incitement in 2012, for which he served an eight-month suspended sentence. The party is competing in ten provinces and 24 communes, with 49 percent of the fielded candidates being women. <sup>78</sup> In March 2022, ten of its candidates were removed in Phnom Penh. <sup>79</sup>
<b>Cambodia Indigenous People's Democracy Party</b>	The Cambodia Indigenous People's Democracy Party was created by Plang Sin in 2015 with the aim of defending the rights of indigenous groups and protecting their lands, forest, and culture. <sup>80</sup> It is contesting in 3 provinces and 19 communes and only 19 percent of its fielded candidates are women. <sup>81</sup>
<b>Ekpheap Cheat Khmer Party</b>	The Ekpheap Cheat Khmer Party is led by Un Chim, who has been embroiled in controversy since last year because he allegedly sent party members a voice message that mimicked Hun Sen's voice. <sup>82</sup> The party is competing in four provinces and 14 communes, with 35 percent of its fielded candidates being women. <sup>83</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Mech Dara and Erin Handley, "Beehive Party Founder Sonando Set to Rejoin Politics After Blessing from Hun Sen," *The Phnom Penh Post*, 7 March 2018, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/beehive-party-founder-sonando-set-rejoin-politics-after-blessing-hun-sen>.

<sup>78</sup> Baliga, "Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections."

<sup>79</sup> Nat Sopheap and Ouch Sony, "Updated: NEC Removes More Opposition Party Candidates," *Voice of Democracy*, 29 March 2022, <https://vodenglish.news/nec-removes-more-opposition-party-candidates/>.

<sup>80</sup> Khy Sovuthy, "The Party Protecting the Kingdom's Forests," *Khmer Times*, 12 June 2018, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/499820/the-party-protecting-the-kingdoms-forests/>.

<sup>81</sup> Baliga, "Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections."

<sup>82</sup> Yin Soeum, "EKCP asks Sar Kheng to Take Action," *Khmer Times*, 18 January 2022, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501008564/ekcp-asks-sar-kheng-to-take-action-against-un-chim/>.

<sup>83</sup> Baliga, "Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections."

<b><i>Reaksmey Khemara Party</i></b>	The Reaksmey Khemara Party was formed in the lead-up to the 2018 General Elections and is led by Sin Sopheap, who described his party as nationalist. <sup>84</sup> It is only competing in three provinces and six communes and less than one third of its fielded candidates are women. <sup>85</sup>
<b><i>Khmer Economic Development Party</i></b>	In the 2017 Commune Elections, the Khmer Economic Development won less than one percent of the popular vote together with the Cambodian Nationality Party. <sup>86</sup> It is competing in three provinces and four communes, with 26 percent of its fielded candidates being women. <sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Jack Board and Ouch Sony, “Small Parties Try to Jockey for Position in Cambodia’s ‘One-Horse Race’ Election,” *Channel News Asia*, 27 July 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/small-parties-cambodian-election-day-813251>.

<sup>85</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

<sup>86</sup> “More Parties to Accept Seats,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/more-parties-accept-seats>.

<sup>87</sup> Baliga, “Guide to the Political Parties Contesting the 2022 Commune Elections.”

## 4. Expert Evaluation of the 2017/2018 Electoral Process

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Regarding the 2017/2018 electoral process, the interviewed experts made a point to distinguish between 2017 and 2018 given the events surrounding the 2018 General Elections. They agree that the 2017 election process can be considered as “acceptable” according to international election standards and, particularly, as compared with previous elections in Cambodia. It can be regarded as the “least controversial” election process.<sup>88</sup> According to one of the interviewed experts, the 2017 Commune Elections can be rated as 70 percent in terms of the observed quality, with over 80 percent constituting a free and fair election.<sup>89</sup> Another expert rated the election at 80 percent.<sup>90</sup>

The relatively high rating of the 2017 Commune Elections is attributed to several positive factors in the electoral process. First, there was active participation from voters and observers, with the European Union (EU) and Japan providing electoral and technical support. Second, there were few complaints about the conduct of the elections from voters and local and international observers. Third, members of the competing political parties and of the National Assembly were able to conduct political activities in their communities to promote active participation and competition in the elections. These developments were enhanced by the fact that the elections led to the creation of a “democratic” NEC composed of four members of the ruling party, four members of the CNRP and one independent member.<sup>91</sup>

According to one of the experts, this backdrop should have provided the set-up for the “most interesting and competitive” general elections in Cambodian history.<sup>92</sup> However, the lack of political competition from a major party made the 2018 election

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<sup>88</sup> Confidential interview 2, 29 April 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Confidential interview 3, 29 April 2022.

<sup>90</sup> Confidential interview 1, 26 April 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Confidential interview 2, 29 April 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Confidential interview 3, 29 April 2022.

process “unacceptable”.<sup>93</sup> One of the experts rated the election at around 30 percent in terms of observed quality of international standards of free and fair elections.<sup>94</sup> This complicates comparisons between the 2017 and 2018 election processes. In the pre-election period, the interviewed experts identified three issues.

Firstly, an amendment of the political party law allowed the government to file complaints against political parties whose leaders have been charged with criminal acts. The second one pertains to the NEC leadership composition, with three of the CNRP members resigning from their positions.<sup>95</sup> Third, election laws allowed members of other political parties to take the seats of winning parties in the National Assembly. When the CNRP was legally dissolved in November 2017, it turned over 55 seats in the National Assembly.<sup>96</sup>

During the electoral process, the neutrality of civil servants was questioned, with some having used state resources to serve the ruling party during the elections.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, there is a low level of trust in the election outcomes due to the presence of fewer local and international observers and a lack of electoral and technical support from the EU and Japan.<sup>98</sup> While the turnout to the elections was high, one expert expressed reservations if the conduct was free and fair because individuals were “forced” to go vote in order to increase voter turnout numbers.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, another expert pointed out that it is important to keep in mind that, in comparison to the 1993 General Elections organized by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, the 2017/2018 elections were less violent and that there are more competing parties now.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Confidential interview 2, 29 April 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Confidential interview 1, 26 April 2022.

<sup>95</sup> Confidential interview 3, 29 April 2022.

<sup>96</sup> Niem Chheng, “With CNRP Gone, Minor Parties Take Their National Assembly Seats,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, 28 November 2017, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/cnrp-gone-minor-parties-take-their-national-assembly-seats>.

<sup>97</sup> Confidential interview 3, 29 April 2022.

<sup>98</sup> Confidential interview 1, 26 April 2022.

<sup>99</sup> Confidential interview 2, 29 April 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Confidential interview 4, 3 May 2022.

## 5. Expert Evaluation of the 2022/2023 Electoral Process

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At the time of the expert interviews, the 2022 electoral process is viewed as an improvement over 2018, though it does not meet the same standards as 2017. It is unclear if it will meet the minimum standards for free and fair elections set out by the Committee for Free and Fair Elections (COMFREL), including: a free political environment, the restoration of political rights and the right to stand for elections, protection of the expression of the will of the electorate, the composition of the NEC, an independent and neutral armed forces and courts, and independent media outlets and civil society organizations.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, the participation and relatively strong presence of the CP in the lead-up to the elections is perceived as a positive development, giving a “sense of electoral pluralism”.<sup>102</sup> Whereas the CPP has gained in popularity with the government’s successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in recent months, the CP is evaluating its popularity ahead of the 2023 elections.<sup>103</sup> The pandemic context should not be taken for granted, as one expert noted that people might be more concerned about their individual livelihoods than the electoral process.<sup>104</sup> As such, the outlined priorities for national policy in Table 1 demonstrate such socio-economic concerns. Moreover, the top leaders of the government have informed local authorities to facilitate the participation of other political parties in the elections.<sup>105</sup> In comparison to 2018, there is also a larger number of electoral observers and voters.

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<sup>101</sup> “Minimum Conditions for a Free and Fair 2022 Commune Council Election in Cambodia,” COMFREL, [https://comfrel.org/english/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/302\\_Final-Minimum-Condition\\_-Eng.pdf](https://comfrel.org/english/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/302_Final-Minimum-Condition_-Eng.pdf).

<sup>102</sup> Confidential interview 2, 29 April 2022.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Confidential interview 4, 3 May 2022.

<sup>105</sup> Confidential interview 1, 26 April 2022.

**Table 2: Priorities for National Policy (Experts)**

Policy Issues
COVID-19 recovery
Job creation
Social protection for the poor and elderly
Youth employment, education, and health
Public services (water access, electricity, and infrastructure)
Strengthening law enforcement (drugs and conflicts over resources and land)
Agricultural markets
Technology/ digital promotion
Eradication of corruption
Social justice (fair and independent judicial system)

The outcomes of the 2022 elections will provide a “baseline” of voting behavior in 2023.<sup>106</sup> According to one interviewed expert, there are three scenarios for the 2023 General Elections.<sup>107</sup> First, the CP is the main opposition to challenge the CPP. Second, the CP and other parties merge ahead of the elections. Third, the CP could be dissolved based on existing laws or an internal break-up of the party. Some of the experts warned that the holding of regular elections that might not meet international standards could erode the meaning and quality of this democratic process, as well as legitimize the government. Since the Khmer Rouge used the word democracy, it is more important to examine the “quality and meaningfulness” of the electoral process.<sup>108</sup> An independent media and fostering a habit of competition are viewed as equally important to an active democracy.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Confidential interview 3, 29 April 2022.

<sup>107</sup> Confidential interview 2, 29 April 2022.

<sup>108</sup> Confidential interview 3, 29 April 2022.

<sup>109</sup> Confidential interview 1, 26 April 2022; Confidential interview 3, 29 April 2022.



## 6. Educated Youth Perspectives on the 2022/2023 Elections

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Sixteen out of the twenty focus group participants plan to return home to vote in the local elections and one person is not registered to vote. Among those planning to vote, the reasons for voting included wanting to vote for small parties to balance political representation, to exercise their right as a first-time voter, and to experience the voting process, and because they are familiar with the local candidates running in the elections.<sup>110</sup>

While all the participants in one of the focus groups said that they would again return home to vote in 2023, this was not the case in the other focus group. They were unsure about their plans because it would depend on the outcome of the 2022 elections and on if they personally thought that their vote would matter for the election.<sup>111</sup> Both of the elections are viewed as equally important, though one of the participants mentioned that commune elections could have a more direct impacts on their livelihoods due to decentralization.<sup>112</sup>

Few of the focus group participants are aware of party candidates running in the upcoming elections, mentioning that political parties should share the profiles of candidates on their social media pages. Moreover, political parties should focus on informing the public about their proposed policies rather than using personal issues or past achievements as their platforms. The CPP is perceived as the most viable party in the elections. For one of the focus groups, the second most viable party is undetermined, with some participants mentioning that if the CP merges with one or more other party it could potentially be competitive in the 2023 elections.<sup>113</sup> For the other focus group, the

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<sup>110</sup> Focus Group Discussion 2, 1 May 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Focus Group Discussion 1, 30 April 2022.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

CP, Funcinpec, Khmer Will Party, KNP, GDP, National Reform Party, and Khmer United Party are considered as viable in addition to the CPP.<sup>114</sup>

**Table 3: Priorities for National Policy (Youth)**

<b>Policy Area</b>	<b>Priority Issue</b>
<b>COVID-19 pandemic</b>	Economic recovery (economic growth and domestic production) Containment measures
<b>Land rights</b>	Land concessions Land re-settlement
<b>Agriculture</b>	Water irrigation Market access for farmers
<b>Labor rights</b>	Resolving NagaWorld labor dispute Increasing salary/wage of factory workers
<b>Sustainable development</b>	Affordable housing (such as for student housing) Sustainable resources
<b>Institutional capacity</b>	Reform of civil service
<b>Foreign Policy</b>	Rapprochement with Western countries, especially the US
<b>Advertising</b>	Reduction in beer advertisements
<b>Gender equality</b>	Inclusive national policies
<b>Minority rights</b>	Addressing anti-Vietnamese and anti-Chinese sentiment

Tables 2 and 3 provide an overview of the priorities for national and local policy that participants discussed during both focus groups. While they cover a range of policy areas from COVID-19 recovery to foreign policy, many of the participants voiced their concerns about policy issues linked to improving the socio-economic livelihoods of younger and older generations and the public safety of their local communities. Although one participant discussed Cambodian foreign policy, most of the discussions focused on the local level, especially on the necessity of a variety of infrastructure developments and on enhancing public service provisions without paying money to local officials.

<sup>114</sup> Focus Group Discussion 2, 1 May 2022.

**Table 4: Priorities for Local Policy (Youth)**

<b>Policy Area</b>	<b>Priority Issue</b>
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Road construction Sewage construction Electricity (such as streetlights) Water access (especially during the dry season) Waste management Water drainage system (construction, repair and clearance)
<b>Agriculture</b>	Water irrigation Reasonable prices for farmers
<b>Public services</b>	Healthcare Education (especially high school) Birth and family certificates Traffic control
<b>Public space</b>	Community sports Public debate on village policies and problems
<b>Rule of law</b>	Village safety Addressing drug problem in schools (starting with primary school)
<b>Communication</b>	On roles and responsibilities of local authorities On budget of commune
<b>Corruption</b>	Eradication Declaration of assets from leaders to commune
<b>Climate change</b>	Chemical fertilizers Tree planting

The focus group participants emphasized that elections are critical for civic participation because this is the only opportunity available for Cambodians to participate in politics. Allowing citizens to elect their representatives ensures that different perspectives are represented in Commune Councils and at the National Assembly, encouraging public debate on local and national policies and laws. Even if the smaller parties do not have a large presence in parliament, some of the focus group participants

view this still as important for political representation. Others questioned if their local and national officials are representing the interests of their constituents in practice.

Holding elections spurs competition amongst the large and small parties and contributes to creating civic norms and culture in Cambodia. This ensures that elected officials at least need to be more aware of their actions. One focus group pointed out that electoral competition additionally means that the ruling party needs to keep improving its own performance.<sup>115</sup> There was a debate in one of the focus groups on if elections are necessary if there is an accountable government that implements policies in a fair and equal manner.<sup>116</sup> Several participants repeated the aforementioned benefits of elections for public debate and others highlighted that elections should be considered as a tool of accountability rather than representation.

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<sup>115</sup> Focus Group Discussion 2, 1 May 2022.

<sup>116</sup> Focus Group Discussion 1, 30 April 2022.

## 7. Concluding Thoughts

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The 2022 Commune Elections and the 2023 General Elections are taking place at a pivotal moment in Cambodia's pandemic recovery process and in the context of Cambodia's chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The outstanding and primary concern of any election cycle set today is the absence of a viable political opposition. This in itself renders the anticipated outcome of such processes reasonably predictable. It is however crucial to note that, versus the 2018 cycle, there are a larger number of electoral observers, and the presence of an alternative vote for nearly all communes in the kingdom.

At this time in the wake of a global pandemic that Cambodia continues to navigate with success, voters' concerns are primarily rooted in continued economic recovery, social protection, and public service provisions. Concerns around corruption and justice remain. Voter turnout is anticipated to be positive for both the commune elections, which will be seen themselves as a barometer for the climate leading to 2023's national elections.

A process of capacity building around empowering electorate understanding of party-policy and key issue alignment would support the return to competitive election cycles. In this way the role of the election cycle would be to outline national development planning, allowing a move away from personality politics. Particularly, focus should be on the process of the electoral cycle, and the stance on voter-considered issues such as infrastructure and environment. The electorate has a crucial and deterministic role to play through the available voting process.