

A result foretold: on Cambodia polls

The outcome had been ensured long before [Cambodia went to the polls](#) on Sunday, with Prime Minister Hun Sen ensuring his return by keeping key Opposition leaders out of the fray and muzzling the media. The next morning, a spokesperson for his Cambodian People's Party was smugly claiming it had won all 125 parliamentary seats, renewing its mandate for another five years. Despite official estimates of turnout in excess of 80%, the CPP's victory is hollow. Mr. Hun Sen, who has been at the helm since 1985, left nothing to chance to see that his party was effectively uncontested. Voters were threatened with punishment if they responded to calls for an election boycott. A number of dummy parties joined what international observers called a sham election. Since Cambodia's first free elections in 1993, the CPP's single-party dominance had been largely enabled by a fragmented Opposition. But things changed before the 2013 elections with the merger of two big Opposition parties to form the Cambodia National Rescue Party. The CNRP came within striking distance of the ruling party in those polls, and its impressive showing in the June 2017 polls to local bodies underscored its potential further. Within months, the courts ordered its dissolution on allegations of a plot to overthrow the regime. Its leader, Kem Sokha, was arrested on treason charges; several CNRP veterans are in exile. The closure of a reputed newspaper last year exposed official intolerance of media freedom. Some voluntary organisations have been forced to wind up because of a perceived western bias.

The climate of fear and intimidation has drawn criticism from regional and global rights groups. New York-based Human Rights Watch recently released an investigation on Mr. Hun Sen's inner circle, made up mostly of top security personnel linked to the brutal Khmer Rouge massacres of the 1970s. Closer home, ASEAN has traditionally been averse to commenting on the internal affairs of member-countries. Meanwhile, the massive Chinese investments in infrastructure projects in Cambodia come with no overt political strings attached, and Mr. Hun Sen continues to capitalise on his close ties with Beijing to counter domestic and overseas criticism of his human rights record. The U.S. House of Representatives last week approved legislation to sanction top Cambodian officials implicated in the violation of the rule of law. The measure will be taken up by the Senate soon. Whether Mr. Hun Sen will adopt a more conciliatory approach in his new term is a matter of speculation. But Cambodians clearly need some respite, as they struggle to rebuild their nation after the widespread destruction during the genocide under the Khmer Rouge and the civil war that followed.

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