

Cambodian Election

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The Cambodian National Assembly election, held on July 29, 2018, resulted in a victory for the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Critics viewed the election, in which the CPP likely won all 125 parliamentary seats, as neither free nor fair and the victory as "hollow" given that the CPP banned the largest opposition party in 2017. The Trump Administration [stated](#) that the poll "failed to represent the will of the Cambodian people" and represented "the most significant setback yet to the democratic system enshrined in Cambodia's constitution..." Nearly 600,000 ballots, or roughly 9% of votes cast, [reportedly](#) were invalid, most of which the opposition believes were purposely spoiled to protest the illegitimacy of the election.

Political History

Between 1975 and 1991, Cambodia endured the four-year reign of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, also known as the Khmer Rouge, during which an estimated 2 million Cambodians died, as well as Vietnamese invasion and occupation, and civil war. The [Paris Peace Agreement](#), signed by Cambodia and 18 other nations pledging to support the country's sovereignty and reconstruction on October 23, 1991, ended the conflict. It also established a "liberal democracy" with "periodic and genuine elections."

Since the United Nations administered the first post-war national elections in 1993, the Kingdom of Cambodia has made fitful progress in its political and social development, including the conduct of elections and growth of civil society. According to [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD) data, [official development assistance](#) (ODA) from major OECD aid donors, including the United States, totaled more than \$10 billion between 1995 and 2016. This assistance helped to restore and develop Cambodian political, social, and economic institutions that had been destroyed under the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979). In recent years, assistance from China, which comes without conditions for good governance and human rights, has roughly matched total ODA flows from OECD donors to Cambodia.

Political Developments

The Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), a union of two opposition parties led by Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, made significant gains in the 2013 parliamentary election and 2017 local elections. The CNRP's strength reflected a younger and more globalized electorate that is less focused on Cambodia's past turbulence, more concerned about corruption and inequality, and more demanding about government accountability and performance. The threat of a CNRP victory in 2018 compelled Hun Sen, who often has employed undemocratic means to stay in power, to crack

down on the opposition. In November 2017, the Supreme Court of Cambodia made a ruling that dissolved the CNRP for "conspiring with the United States to overthrow the government." U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia William Heidt [stated](#) that Hun Sen's accusations that the United States is attempting to overthrow his government are "inaccurate, misleading, and baseless."

Since 2008, former CNRP president Sam Rainsy has faced several defamation charges regarded by many observers as politically motivated, and has spent most of his time in exile. In December 2017, Sam was charged with treason for posting a video on social media urging security personnel not to "obey orders from any dictators if they order you to shoot and kill innocent people." Former CNRP vice-president Kem Sokha has been detained since September 2017 awaiting trial for [treason](#), or conspiracy with a foreign power, allegedly for collaborating with the United States to foment a popular overthrow of the CPP.

The Cambodian government has placed increasing restrictions on political and social activism, civil society, free speech, and foreign-funded democracy programs. Since late 2015, more than 25 opposition members and government critics have been arrested. In 2017, the government ordered the *Cambodia Daily*, known as an opposition newspaper, to shut down, ostensibly for failing to pay taxes. In 2017, the Cambodian Foreign Ministry expelled the Washington, D.C.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI), which receives U.S. funding and was engaged in [democracy programs in Cambodia](#), on the grounds that it was not registered with the government.

In 2017, the government closed more than one dozen Cambodian radio stations that sold air time to Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA). RFA, facing political and economic pressure from the government, closed its Phnom Penh office. In May 2018, the government made its first arrest under a lèse-majesté law, passed by the National Assembly in February 2018, which makes insulting the monarch a crime.

U.S. Policy Responses

[U.S. relations with Cambodia](#) have become strained in recent years due to Hun Sen's authoritarian actions. The Trump Administration [announced](#) in December 2017 that the U.S. government would "restrict entry into the United States of those individuals involved in undermining democracy in Cambodia." Pursuant to [Executive Order 13818](#), which implemented the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (§1261 of [P.L. 114-328](#)), in June 2018 the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Cambodian General Hing Bun Hieng, commander of Hun Sen's bodyguard unit, "for being the leader of an entity involved in serious human rights abuses." Sanctioned individuals are denied entry into the United States, and any assets that they hold in the United States are blocked.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018 ([P.L. 115-141](#)) imposes democracy-related and other conditions upon U.S. assistance to the government of Cambodia. [H.R. 5754](#), the Cambodia Democracy Act of 2018, which was passed in the House on July 25, 2018, would impose visa restrictions and block assets of senior government officials that the President determines have undermined democracy or committed or directed serious human rights violations. [S.Res. 279](#), passed by the Senate on November 16, 2017, urges the Department of the Treasury to consider placing all senior Cambodian government officials implicated in the suppression of democracy and human rights abuses on the Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list and calls on the Cambodian government to release opposition leader Kem Sokha. Some policymakers have considered suspending Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) duty-free treatment upon some Cambodian exports to the United States worth about \$400 million in order to pressure Hun Sen into reversing his suppression of democracy.