

PERSPECTIVE

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Cambodian Power Shift in 2018?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Both major political parties claimed victory in the largely free and fair June 4 commune elections by looking at the results from different perspectives.
- The long-ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won 1,156 commune chief seats, while the opposition Cambodia's National Rescue Party (CNRP) picked up 498 seats.
- These results signify the end of the CPP's political dominance in rural areas.
- This sets the stage for a tight political race in the 2018 general election. If results favour the opposition party, Cambodia may face rocky and uncertain times. Historically, Cambodia has not had smooth power transitions.

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INTRODUCTION

The competition between Cambodia's two main political parties – the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) – has intensified since the stunning general election outcome in 2013. The recent commune election was a turning point in rural politics in that it marked an end to the CPP's political monopoly in the rural areas, which it has held since the 1980s. Based on the results of the election, the local power base of both parties has been largely equalized, setting the stage for a highly competitive general election in 2018.

The commune election on June 4 was a milestone in the strengthening of democratic institutions and decentralization in Cambodia. Twelve political parties contested the 11,572 commune council seats in 1,646 communes across the country. Voter turnout was markedly higher than previous local elections, at 85 percent of the total 7.8 million of registered voters.

Commune council elections were first organized in 2002 to strengthen grassroots democracy and as part of a decentralization policy. Rural areas are the traditional stronghold and powerbase of CPP, and in the 2002 local election, it overwhelmingly won more than 90 percent of commune chief seats.

The 2017 local election has turned out to be a critical point in Cambodia's rural politics. Although CPP retained a majority of seats, it lost more than 400 commune chiefs to the opposition, signifying an end to its political monopoly in rural areas. According to the official result released by the National Election Committee (NEC) on June 25, CPP garnered 1,156 communes along with 6,503 commune council seats, while CNRP picked up 489 communes along with 5,007 commune council seats.

In terms of popular votes, there was only a small margin between the two parties, with CPP receiving 3.54 million votes (50.76 percent of total votes) and CNRP receiving 3.05 million votes (43.83 percent of total votes). CNRP gained 16 per cent more of the popular vote than it did in the 2012 commune election.

The election was conducted smoothly largely thanks to the improved performance of NEC and relatively mature political parties contesting the election. Local and international observers agree that the election was free and fair, without any major irregularity or malpractice. All political parties have accepted the election results as a true reflection of the people's will. A group of local NGOs known as "Situation Room" asserted that the vote counting was accurate.¹

The political parties, local civil society groups, and local pundits have applauded the electoral process, and the US Embassy issued a statement saying that the election is "an

¹ Ananth Baliga and Niem Chheng, "NGOs claim 95 percent result count accuracy", The Phnom Penh Post, 13 June 2017. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/ngos-claim-95-percent-result-count-accuracy>, accessed June 14, 2017

important milestone in Cambodia's continued democratic development. We call on Cambodian citizens, political parties, and institutions to accept the results of the election peacefully and in a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation."² International observers from the Centrist Democrats International (CDI), the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP), and the Centrist Asia-Pacific Democrats International (CAPDI) issued separate statements endorsing the election results and praising Cambodia in its endeavour to strengthen democratic institutions.³

POLICY PLATFORM

CPP used two key terms in its election campaign – “peace” and “development” – while the CNRP focused on “positive change” and “nonviolence”. The narrative of CPP aimed to persuade the electorate to acknowledge the achievements of the government, to have trust in the government, and to vote for continuity. On the other hand, CNRP used populist rhetoric to echo aspirations for change.

CPP issued a manifesto calling for: strengthening democracy and fundamental freedoms for social harmony; improving local development and people's livelihood; developing rural infrastructure; enhancing food-water-energy security; offering efficient, transparent and reliable social services; supporting vulnerable and marginal groups; fighting corruption and abuse of power; and heightening public order and safety.

In turn, CNRP focused on a five-point policy, namely people empowerment, livelihood improvement and development, public services, security, and decentralization. The most attractive policy is fiscal decentralization, with US\$0.5 million to be allocated for the annual budget of each commune. Currently, the budget for each commune ranges between US\$10,000 to US\$20,000, depending on the size of the commune.

CONTESTED NARRATIVES

Both the major political parties have declared victory and expressed their confidence that they would win the upcoming general election.

Using the results of the 2013 general election as a benchmark, CPP argues that it gained about 300,000 votes in the commune election, as compared to CNRP's gain of 90,000 votes. Based on this calculation, and if the trend continues, CPP will be winning a majority in the upcoming election. A commentary published by Fresh News, an online news outlet close to the government, posits that the CPP will get 74 seats while CNRP will only win 54 seats.

² The U.S. Embassy Statement on Cambodia's Commune Elections, June 5, 2017, <https://kh.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-statement-cambodias-commune-elections/>, accessed June 11, 2017

³ Suos Yara, “Letter to Editor: Cambodia's Elections: Another Milestone in Democracy”, The Khmer Times, 8 June 2017, <http://www.khmertimeskh.com/news/39127/letter-to-editor---cambodia---s-elections--another-milestone-in-democracy/>, accessed on June 11, 2017.

On the other hand, by using the results of the commune election in 2012 as a benchmark, CNRP argues that it received an additional one million votes, and won over 400 more commune chief seats; hence it should win the majority in the 2018 general election.

Using the commune election a barometer for the general election has its weaknesses. A swing in votes is always possible. For instance, the result of the commune elections in 2012 was not clearly reflected in the result of the general elections in 2013.

There are several unknown factors in the 2018 general election as well. First, about one million registered voters did not vote in the local elections. Second, some voters voted for the commune council candidates rather than for the political party these people represented. Third, some will be voting on the basis of the performances of the newly elected commune chiefs.

Strategy plays a critical part in convincing the swing voters and first-time voters, and it would be a serious mistake if either party becomes complacent and overconfident. Continued results-oriented reforms on one side and engagement with voters on the other are necessary for the securing of votes.

POWER SHIFT

Post-colonial Cambodia has gone through five regime changes, most accompanied by war and violence. Political distrust, ideological differences, weak democratic institutions, and foreign intervention have been the root causes of the violent regime changes.

Prime Minister Hun Sen has warned many times, even before the general election in 2013, that “civil war” would occur if his party lost a general election. The remark shows a deep distrust between the two major opponents. The “survival of the fittest” strategy and the “culture of revenge” will most likely continue to haunt Cambodian politics.

CPP has consolidated power since 1998, with its power peaking after the general election in 2008 when it captured more than 80 percent of National Assembly seats. However, the general election in 2013 was a serious setback for the party—it lost 22 seats to the opposition party.

The opposition party, regardless of some election irregularities and malpractices, gained 55 of 123 seats in the National Assembly. In terms of the popular vote, it received about 2.9 million votes (44.46 percent), while the ruling CPP had only 3.2 million votes (48.83 percent).

This was a shocking result given that CPP won more than 90 percent of the commune chief seats a year earlier. Patronage politics had after all been extensively employed in rural areas, and CCP also used pork-barrel politics as a punitive measure to marginalize the opposition.

Patronage politics, generally defined as transactions between politicians and the electorate in which material incentives and protection are offered in exchange for political loyalty and

support, no longer seem to work effectively. The electorate has become more demanding and sophisticated, especially urban dwellers.

Kheang Un, a prominent analyst of Cambodian politics, wrote in 2005 that, “the urban combination of pluralist voices, a sophisticated electorate, and open political space is more conducive to opposition parties in electoral contests than are rural areas.”⁴ The argument remains true today, as the opposition party has gained strong support from the urban electorate.

CPP’s political power base remains relatively strong in rural areas although it has lost several hundred communes to the opposition party. Rural areas are critical in elections since about 80 percent of the total population resides there. Political parties continue to search for new, attractive and effective strategies to gain legitimacy among the rural people.

Three factors that have shaped Cambodian political landscape in the past five years are the country’s changing demographics, the quick spread of communications technology, and lackluster public sector reforms. Corruption remains high and reforms have produced little positive outcome.

More than 65 percent of the Cambodian electorate is below 35 years old and most of these look beyond the country’s tragic past and expect more from the government. Their aspirations are higher than their parents, and they are looking for job opportunities, results-oriented reforms, good governance and rule of law, social justice, environmental protection, and respect of human rights.

As Duncan McCargo argues, “as the local election made clear, Cambodians no longer feel a debt of loyalty to the Hun Sen government for past accomplishments: young voters in particular are looking for a brighter future, and expect both major parties to put forward a new generation of more sophisticated candidates in 2018.”⁵

Communications technology has significantly changed the political discourse. The younger voters tend to be attracted to and believe in online news proliferated through social media. This has reduced the effectiveness of state media control and propaganda in shaping public opinion on national issues.

Public opinion shaped by media and communication is a “game changer”. As Phoak Kung has argued “The days when the government could entirely control the flow of information are long gone. Both the CPP and the CNRP must adapt to this unprecedented change if they want to remain relevant. A party that can respond to voters’ demands and concerns will receive more support.”⁶

⁴ Kheang Un (2005) Patronage Politics and Hybrid Democracy: Political Change in Cambodia, 1993-2003. Asian Perspective, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 212.

⁵ Duncan McCargo, Local Polls Leaves Hun Sen Looking Vulnerable in 2018 Election, Nikkei Asian Review, June 8, 2017, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Duncan-McCargo/Local-poll-leaves-Hun-Sen-looking-vulnerable-in-2018-election?page=1>, accessed June 12, 2017.

⁶ Phoak Kung, The Rise of Public Opinion in Cambodia’s Politics, The Diplomat, October 31, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/the-rise-of-public-opinion-in-cambodias-politics/>, accessed on June 12, 2017.

Although CPP has been reasonably successful in maintaining peace and stability, economic growth, and infrastructure development, there are still serious shortcomings that are now more widely acknowledged. Public institutions and services have not satisfactorily responded to the needs and demands of the people. Moreover, inequality between the rich and the poor, between urban and rural areas, has become a main challenge for the government.

The opposition party has effectively capitalized on the weaknesses and shortcomings of CPP and captured public sentiment to trump up its political campaign for “change”. If CPP cannot deliver results-oriented reforms, people’s aspirations for “change” will rise.

TOWARDS THE 2018 GENERAL ELECTION

Political swings are not uncommon in Cambodian politics. Most voters are not ideologically driven; they are pragmatic. They vote for parties that they believe can meet their expectations, positively affect their livelihood, and move the country forward. Soft infrastructure such as governance and rule of law is as important as hard infrastructure such as roads, electricity supply, and irrigation.

Performance matters most. If the elected commune chiefs from CNRP do not perform as well as expected, voters may shift to vote for CPP in 2018. The same applies to the commune chiefs from CPP. CNRP now has a chance to prove that its leadership at the local level is clean and capable. To gain votes in the urban areas, CPP needs to speed up reforms and improve governance, strengthen the justice system and rule of law and promote inclusive and sustainable development.

The urban middle class tends to vote for the opposition to express its dissatisfaction with the government, not necessarily to support the leadership or policies of the opposition party. Corruption, social injustice, and unemployment are the key concerns of urban voters. CNRP will likely retain its dominance in urban areas unless the government can effectively address these issues and concerns.

The main concerns for the rural voter are falling commodity prices, lack of market access, low productivity in the agriculture sector, lack of rural infrastructure such as irrigation and rural roads, indebtedness, healthcare, education and public services. CPP will likely retain a majority in the rural areas if it can improve public services and continue the development of rural infrastructure.

Both political parties are under mounting pressure to meet public expectations. The two key words for the election campaign in 2018 will be “reform” and “change”. CPP will advocate for “continued reforms”, while CNRP will promote its agenda for “change”.

CONCLUSION

The results of the general election in 2013 and the commune election in 2017 signify power shifts in the kingdom. A tight political race is expected in the 2018 general election, and political conflict and instability will likely occur if the opposition party wins.

There are two scenarios for the coming general election. First, if the winning party can secure more than 55 percent of the seats at the national assembly then it would reduce the risk of a political deadlock. Second, if the margin of the winning party is small, let's say one or two seats more than the losing party, then a political deadlock is likely.

In the second scenario, the losing party will likely demand vote recounting or re-election in certain constituencies or opt for orchestrating large-scale street protests. To resolve the political crisis and prevent political turmoil and violence, both parties may need to consider forming a coalition government or establishing a fair and stable power-sharing arrangement. Third party intervention will be needed to convene dialogue between the two parties in such a situation.

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