

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN D. CIORCIARI

The Upcoming Cambodian Election and U.S.-Cambodian Ties under the Trump Administration

By NICOLE SMOLINSKE

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On June 4, Cambodia will hold commune elections, the first to occur since the 2013 national elections when the Cambodian People's Party received a serious challenge from the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party. During the 2013 elections, the CNRP did much better than expected and won 55 out of the 123 seats in the National Assembly. To better understand the significance and political climate surrounding the upcoming commune elections and to discuss the current state of U.S.-Cambodian ties under the Trump administration, NBR spoke with John D. Ciorciari (University of Michigan).

For our readers less familiar with Cambodian politics, can you provide a brief overview of the political climate since the 2013 national elections?

The Cambodian government has been led by Prime Minister Hun Sen since 1985, with a brief interlude of UN administration in the early 1990s. Hun Sen heads the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and is rightly described by many analysts as an elected authoritarian leader.

After the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) surprisingly captured nearly 45% of the popular vote in 2013, mass public demonstrations supporting the CNRP alleged that the CPP had engaged in fraud during the election and demanded an inquiry. Even though negotiations took place after the elections, the CNRP did not gain very much in terms of formal authority in the government. While Hun Sen has lost a great deal of public electoral support, he still holds strong control over the official levers of power—the courts, police, bureaucracy,

army, and to a lesser extent the parliament. His influence is not just at the national level; in most parts of the country, his power extends to the local level.

Since 2013–14, the CPP has used a variety of intimidation measures in attempts to silence the opposition. A few examples of such attempts include the issuing of an arrest warrant against former opposition leader Sam Rainsy; the arrest of a group of workers from

JOHN D. CIORCIARI is an Associate Professor and Director of the International Policy Center at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan. He served in the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of International Affairs from 2004 to 2007 and is a long-time senior legal adviser to the Documentation Center of Cambodia. He is the author of *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975* (2010) and co-author of *Hybrid Justice: The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia* (2014).

the human rights NGO ADHOC; the killing of Kem Ley, a public figure who was an outspoken critic of the government; and a defamation suit that the government brought against the current opposition leader Kem Sokha. Despite these efforts to weaken or intimidate the opposition, the upcoming commune elections might reveal the extent of popular dissatisfaction with Hun Sen and the CPP.

What is at stake during the Cambodian commune elections on June 4? In what ways do you think the commune elections will serve as a bellwether for the 2018 national election results?

In February, Kem Sokha took over as opposition leader for Sam Rainsy. The commune elections are important to Kem Sokha because he needs to demonstrate results to his base. In particular, he needs to demonstrate that he can appeal to voters outside the CNRP's core constituencies composed of the middle class, educated urbanites, and students.

The commune elections will be a bellwether in a few ways. The most important way is that the vote should give some indication of whether the opposition's appeal has extended beyond the Phnom Penh metropolitan area and a few other small enclaves and into the CPP's historical strong ground in the villages and provinces. The ways that the government is structured and legislative seats are allocated tend to overrepresent the provinces at the expense of the capital city—which is by design, since such an arrangement benefits the ruling party. If the opposition is to be effective in the next election and beat the CPP, rather than merely gain a large minority of the votes, it needs to extend significantly into the rural CPP strongholds. The commune elections will be a good test of that.

In the last commune elections, the main opposition parties received around 30% of the votes, but only gained about 3% of the commune chief positions. The opposition's goal during the upcoming commune elections is to reach 40%, which is clearly a very tall order.

In the aftermath of the 2013 national elections, concerns were raised about the validity of the election result, and questions arose about secure and accurate voting lists. How has the composition of the National Election Committee (NEC) changed to address such concerns, and how might it monitor concerns during the commune elections?

Since the outcry during the 2013 elections, the composition of the NEC has changed to include both CPP and CNRP members. It is certainly possible that there will be concerns raised in the campaigning period during May 20–June 2 ahead of the elections. It is also possible that there will be concrete allegations of fraud or abuse, which is not abnormal in these circumstances. However, it is not clear that the NEC would be able to address these concerns effectively. Of course, it will depend upon the nature of the allegation. As a body, the NEC has limited enforcement authority. Therefore, its main source of leverage lies in its ability to use the bully pulpit and voice concerns to the public and the donor community. One must keep in mind that it is unlikely that the NEC would offer a unified view regarding the credibility of any alleged wrongdoing due to its mixed composition of CPP and CNRP members.

By all accounts, the NEC has cleaned up the voter registration lists by using electronic registration and has implemented a number of security measures such as indelible ink and other techniques to prevent people from casting multiple votes.

What is your reaction to Defense Minister Tea Banh's threat to "smash the teeth" of political opponents and Hun Sen's threat that defeat of the CPP could place the country at risk for a return to civil war? Will these statements affect voter turnout?

While it is hard to know what effect such statements will have on the public, these are certainly threats that need to be taken seriously. Taken in combination with the CPP's past behavior, it would be fair to say that Hun Sen will govern by electoral mandate if he can, and he will likely govern by force if he feels that he must. Hun Sen has shown no signs of a

willingness to relinquish power. It is clear to the Cambodian public at large that these threats are sufficiently credible and should be taken seriously. Whether this will affect their voting decision is less clear.

Returning to the previous question about election monitoring, the Cambodian authorities do not want to leave it to election day to determine the outcome. The CPP's measures of intimidation have been coupled with incentives of payouts to loyal constituents as a way of trying to slant the playing field well in advance of the elections. In one sense, the focus of the international community and NGOs on possible wrongdoing at the polls plays into the government's strategy, because the CPP is taking upstream measures to avoid having to utilize threats of force or stuff ballot boxes on election day. Instead, the CPP wants to create a general climate in which a large plurality of voters see it as very risky to cast their ballot in favor of the opposition. Party leaders want the voters to see a vote for the CPP as rewarding in terms of security and sometimes even in terms of direct remuneration if they continue to support the party.

On May 16, opposition leader Kem Sokha returned from a seventeen-day trip to the United States, during which he had a chance to speak with U.S. lawmakers and members of the Trump administration. What impact might his trip have both in Cambodia and abroad?

Kem Sokha, like other Cambodian opposition figures, regards international support as an important layer of protection for the opposition in Cambodia. This layer of protection is perceived as especially important in the event that the opposition wins the election but the incumbents do not peacefully hand over power. Opposition figures also see international support as an important element of their public legitimacy, which they are then able to communicate to Cambodian voters. In the past, most members of the U.S. Congress have been readily willing to provide support to the Cambodian opposition, and Kem Sokha was in Washington to drum up support ahead of the elections.

In recent years, there have been some trends that may be discouraging for Cambodia's opposition. The Obama administration's rebalance strategy adjusted U.S. policy toward Cambodia. Under the new policy, the administration moved further away from an explicit effort to weaken CPP rule and unseat Hun Sen, instead increasing official engagement. That strategy reflected concerns about China's rising influence in Cambodia and the view that Hun Sen was likely to stay in power for some time. As a result, after the 2013 election the U.S. and other Western embassies took a much more cautious approach in Cambodia than what one might have seen a decade prior.

The new Trump administration has not made much noise about human rights promotion in Southeast Asia, and Kem Sokha is probably concerned about this trend. Ahead of the commune elections, he wants to garner as much support as possible for that agenda, perhaps beginning with Congress. It is not clear how successful he will be, but this is an important element of the opposition strategy.

We have begun to see drifting U.S.-Cambodian ties, notably through the cancelation of Angkor Sentinel, Cambodia's routine joint military exercises with the United States. What direction do you expect the relationship to take in the future, and what can be done to maintain and strengthen ties?

In my view, the importance of Cambodia to U.S. foreign policy is something that doesn't happen naturally. U.S. leaders, both in Congress and in the executive branch, need to be intentional in keeping Cambodia on the agenda. The country does have strategic importance, particularly when one thinks about its role within ASEAN and in the context of the South China Sea disputes.

With the Trump administration talking about scaling down international aid and assistance, and given rhetoric suggesting it will place less priority on promoting democracy and human rights—which has been a prominent feature in past U.S.-Cambodian engagement—all signals point toward U.S. disengagement

from Cambodia. Naturally, if that happens, U.S. influence in Cambodia is going to diminish, which would primarily benefit China. It is possible that the priority that the Trump administration gives to strategic competition in Asia, and maybe the diminishing place of human rights, might make it easier for the administration to do business with Hun Sen, if he indeed remains in power as most expect. But if that occurs, we will likely see a distancing of people-to-people relationships between Cambodia and the United States, as many, if not most, of those links have been built with Cambodians who fall within the natural constituency of the opposition. ♦

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THE NATIONAL BUREAU of ASIAN RESEARCH

1414 NE 42ND STREET, SUITE 300
SEATTLE, WA 98105 • 206-632-7370

1819 L STREET NW, NINTH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 • 202-347-9767

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