



HD After years of torture, glimmers of political hope for Cambodia

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Opposition political forces against Cambodian PM-cum-dictator Hun Sen are growing. But the Cambodian National Rescue Party has its own problems to be a real hope for a long-tortured people.

On January 2, just over five months after a general election in Cambodia that independent observers and the main opposition party say was rigged, the country's Prime Minister-cum-dictator Hun Sen signalled in his usual, unsubtle way that it was time for rising protests from all quarters to cease.

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He set military thugs on striking underpaid sweatshop workers on the outskirts of the ramshackle capital Phnom Penh, injuring dozens and arresting almost as many. A day later police rammed the point home, shooting four protesters dead. You don't get to run a country as you please for almost 29 years by playing nice.

The \$5 **billion** garment industry employs 500,000 people in Cambodia, a country of 15 **million**, and makes up 80% of its exports. Many of the mainly north Asian- and Singaporean-owned factories also have officials and military officers as generally silent partners.

Last year, the Cambodian National Rescue Party was formed, a joint opposition ticket to defeat Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party, which has held power since 1985, including supporting a 1997 coup d'etat that crushed the remaining political power of the country's now-toothless royal family. In the quinquennial July 28 poll, the CNRP rocked the status quo, performing far better than many, including the CPP, had been expecting. In the hurriedly announced official result the opposition claimed 55 seats to the CPP's 68.

But the independent investigation by foreign-backed not-for-profit organisations supported the opposition's claim that more than 1 **million** voters were missing from the rolls, unable to cast a vote, just one of a string of poll irregularities. Since then the opposition has refused to accept the result, and its members have not taken their seats in Parliament.

Once bitten, twice shy. Opposition spokeswoman and elected MP Mu Sochua told Crikey that opposition politicians had been promised all sorts of reforms if they took their seats in 2008 but instead they got increased suppression.

On January 2 this year, when crack troops beat protesters with batons and iron bars, the workers' only crime was to publicly complain about their meagre wage rise from \$80 per month to just \$100 in a country where experts have calculated that a "living wage"—just enough to be housed, clothed and fed in the most minimal fashion—is \$150 and unions have demanded \$160. That will **buy** dinner for two and a modest bottle of **wine** in one of the city's remarkably good French restaurants.

At the same time Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party declared an indefinite ban on gatherings of more than 10 people, clearing protesters from Freedom Square in the city centre, where the opposition had encamped and run regular protests in recent months. On December 29, unions joined the opposition and the growing band of land rights activists in a march through the capital attended by at least 100,00 people, spooking the government into action only days later.

Hun Sen, 61, has form. He is a former guerrilla leader in the murderous Khmer Rouge, which conducted one of the biggest, horrifically systematic genocides the modern world has witnessed. After he failed to see the opposition coming, hopeful commentators began positing that Asia's longest-serving "elected"

leader, in power since 1985, might be getting ready to step down. No chance, he said, vowing to stay on until he is 74. Given his dynastic ambitions and that two of his six children, who stood for Parliament in July but failed to be elected on their own merits, he needs time. Still, they will take their seats through the list system used to fill some of the legislature's places. Yet some observers in Cambodia reckon he may have left it too late, with others rising up through the CCP keen to advance. While Hun Sen himself retains **firm** control, the CPP is riddled with factions beneath him.

Still, despite the protest ban the streets were packed on Tuesday as opposition leader Sam Rainsy, who returned to the country from an eight-year exile in France only 10 days before the July 28 poll, his CNRP deputy Kem Sokha and union leader Rong Chhun faced questioning on their roles in the protests; they were let go but warned that the clearly politically motivated investigation was ongoing.

But there's also a grubby side to the opposition's pitch to voters that makes Rainsy much harder to love than Nelson Mandela or Aung San Suu Kyi. Alongside promises of wages rises, better public services and cleaner, more transparent government is an anti-Vietnamese message that is a cynical play by Rainsy and his team to Cambodians' baser instincts. And locals say it's his canny wife, Choulong Somora, also a CNRP politician, who really runs the show.

Vietnam was where a young Hun Sen fled in 1977 once the Khmer Rouge turned on itself. In 1979, with the support of other Khmer Rouge exiles and the Vietnamese, an invasion seized control of the country from Pol Pot, building his image as the country's saviour.

But salvation from the unspeakable Khmer Rouge years proved less relevant to Cambodia's recently enfranchised youth than the promise of jobs and opportunity at last year's election; aching for change, they were the force behind the extraordinary success of the CNRP. They understand that Hun Sen and his corrupt cronies, backed by the **Chinese** and Vietnamese communist regimes, are stealing their future; many Cambodians, including the cream of its university educated youth, are leaving the country for neighbouring Thailand, where there are more and better-paid jobs.

While the United States has voiced strong support for the opposition, the CRNP continues to look for broader international support, Mu Sochua says. But first they may need to get their own house in order. Encouragingly, the region's biggest economic investor, Japan, has recently signalled its desire to play a bigger role in the country, and reports have emerged this week that there are backroom talks underway once more between the government and the opposition. Fresh glimmers of hope for a tortured nation that too often seems to be slipping back into the dark.

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