

## Politics in Cambodia: Navigating Shifts in Political Terrain and Future Perspectives

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Source: Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Cambodia

### Introduction

In Southeast Asia's dynamic tapestry, Cambodia embraces a distinct position mainly in the realm of politics because of its complicated and evolving political system. The political landscape of Cambodia can be illustrated as a constitutional monarchy where the king performs the role of the Head of State and the Prime Minister gets to serve the nation as the Head of Government. From primeval empires to present-day administration, this country has experienced noteworthy transformations, leaving an ineradicable stain on its society, economy and governance. The shifts in politics can be marked by transformation in leadership role, in governance and advent of questionable electoral processes. From King Norodom Sihanouk's emphasize on neutrality to Khmer Rouge's autocracy and the present-day dominance of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the country has gone through a long period of political alteration in the middle of

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struggles for bringing back democracy. The 2023 election, resulting in a smooth handover of power within the CPP foretells a new dimension of politics under Hun Manet's authority, presenting a state of uncertainty and a lot of 'ifs' and 'buts' for Cambodia's political future.

## **Analyzing Cambodia's Past Political Trajectories**

### **Independence and Post-Colonial Defiance (1953-1970): Leadership Transition and Neutrality**



Source: The Telegraph

Cambodia's political pattern has gone through several shifts since its independence in 1953 under the authority of King Norodom Sihanouk after remaining under French protection since 1863, almost for a decade. The King's main goal was to make sure that Cambodia is not tilting towards any party in the plight of any regional dispute.<sup>2</sup>

Sihanouk's neutralist stance was not welcomed by his opponents and they were suspecting that he might have secret intentions to impose dictatorship in the country by altering the whole constitution. This doubt emerged based on several actions of him including his impartial position during the Indochina War and also for cooperating Viet Cong and North Vietnamese armed forces inside the domain of Cambodia<sup>3</sup>. The shortcomings and ambiguous approaches of

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<sup>2</sup> Michelle Vachon, "Cambodia's Independence: What It Took to Make This Happen 70<sup>th</sup> Years Ago", November 9, 2023, <https://cambodianess.com/article/cambodias-independence-what-it-took-to-make-this-happen-70th-years-ago>.

<sup>3</sup>"Southeast Asia: Hitting the Sihanouk Trail." Time Magazine, May 13, 1966. <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,835484,00.html>.

Sihanouk eventually led to the historical 1970 coup of Cambodia, ensuring the end of his ruling period.

### **Lon Nol's Dominion (1970-1975): US Alignment and Turmoil**

General Lon Nol was the chief instigator of the 1970 coup and he was regarded as the most illustrious leader of the newly formed government, being in the service as the country's premier up to 1972.<sup>4</sup> There was no room for neutrality during his governance. Instead, he openly supported the United States and South Vietnam by enabling both of their forces to function within the territory of Cambodia.<sup>5</sup> In 1972, he declared himself as the President and the communist Khmer Rouge crusade was gaining momentum and as a result the group seized the power from Lon Nol in 1975, compelling him to move to the USA.<sup>6</sup>

### **Khmer Rouge's Rule (1975- 1979): Discontentment of the Civilians**

Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge turned out to be even worse as they formed a vicious regime that embraced autocracy, totalitarianism and took much more oppressive slants that produced nothing but high scale civilian dissatisfaction. This system of government could manage to survive till 1979's intervention of Vietnam but the havoc and instability continued to proceed even after bringing down Khmer Rouge.

### **Transformation in Politics in the Post-Khmer Rouge Era (1980s-1990s): UN Intervention**

After the end of Khmer Rouge's era, the political condition in Cambodia got surrounded by unpredictability and tons of internal conflicts. Bringing stability to the country seemed like a dream. Meanwhile, the intervention of the United Nations paved the way for the formation of an interim ascendancy (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, UN-TAC) in 1992 for

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<sup>4</sup>Oliver Omar, "An Analysis of U.S. Policy Towards Cambodia Between 1969-1973", E-International Relations, May24,2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/24/an-analysis-of-u-s-policy-towards-cambodia-between-1969-1973/>

<sup>5</sup>Joshua N. Weiss, "A Disastrous Balancing Act: The Beginning of Cambodia's Misery," Online Journal for Peace and Conflict Resolution, March 1998, [https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/ojpcr/ojpcr\\_1\\_1/ojpcr\\_1\\_1c.html](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/ojpcr/ojpcr_1_1/ojpcr_1_1c.html).

<sup>6</sup>"Lon Nol seized control of Cambodia in a 1970...", UPI Archives, November 18, 1985, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1985/11/18/Lon-Nol-seized-control-of-Cambodia-in-a-1970/9748501138000/>

supervising Cambodia's progression towards solidity and democracy, monitoring human rights related issues and assuring the fairness of the election which was to be held in 1993.<sup>7</sup>

After winning the 1993 election, FUNCINPEC (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia) faced much challenges as it was working as a syndicate of CPP (Cambodian People's Party) and both had contradictory political approaches.<sup>8</sup> FUNCINPEC campaigned for reconciliation and political durability as the Khmer Rouge had left the system at a chaotic state. On the other hand, CPP under Hun Sen's authority was determined to exercise authoritative rule besides committing to initiate some developmental works as well. But the major downsides of CPP were strong assertion against the party for human rights abuses and the concealment of opposing voices.

### **Contemporary Political Outlook (2000-2018): Dominance and Opposition Suppression**

The CPP continued to carry out its previous approaches after winning the national elections in the years of 2003 and 2008, maintaining its coalition with FUNCINPEC. The party repeatedly was being accused of constraining the oppositions to advance their activities and limiting their political freedom.

In 2013's election, the CPP declared itself victorious despite accused of violating electoral rules and regulations. Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), the opposing party, expressed its discontentment regarding the result of the election and urged for democratic reform by denouncing CPP's superiority. But they could not even maintain their position as an opposition party let alone taking the place of CPP as CNRP's dissolution was decided by Cambodian Supreme Court at the end of 2017 based on the accusation of scheming to overthrow CPP.<sup>9</sup> Thus, CPP started ruling without facing any real opposition since then.

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<sup>7</sup>"CAMBODIA Parliamentary Chamber: Constituent Assembly", [http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2051\\_93.htm](http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2051_93.htm)

<sup>8</sup>Brad Adams, "PM's history of electoral manipulation, intimidation and violence shows he has no desire to cede power to democracy", Human Rights Watch, August 20, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/20/pms-history-electoral-manipulation-intimidation-and-violence-shows-he-has-no-desire>

<sup>9</sup>"Cambodia top court dissolves main opposition CNRP Party", BBC News, November 16, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42006828>

As a result, the CPP secured the most effortless victory in 2018’s national election due to the absence of any valid opposition. The politics of Cambodia then leaned toward “single-party rule”. It raised huge concern for the advocates of democracy and the assemblage of power within CPP added to the tension.

### **Election of 2023: Single-Party Rule and Dynastic Concern**

It is not hard to assume that CPP has once again won in the national election which held on 23 July, 2023. But only after a few days of retaining power, prime minister Hun Sen decided to step down and hand over the position to his son Hun Manet.<sup>10</sup>

An interesting fact is that Candlelight Party, which could add competitiveness to the election to some level, was not allowed to even register just because it did not deposit the original copies of the required document and chose to submit the photocopies.<sup>11</sup> This incident reminded to many how CNRP had been banned on the surface of 2018 election.



Source: The New York Times

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<sup>10</sup>Joshua Kurlantzick, “Cambodia’s Elections: No Surprises, but an Uncertain Leadership Future”, July 25, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/cambodias-elections-no-surprises-uncertain-leadership-future>

<sup>11</sup>“Cambodia’s opposition disqualified from election, appeal fails”, Al Jazeera, May 25, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/25/cambodias-opposition-disqualified-from-election-appeal-fails#:~:text=The%20NEC%20had%20disqualified%20the,Vannol%20said%20after%20the%20ruling.>

Many media outlets did not want to recognize CPP as “winner” as there was no credible competitor against the party. Hun Sen was regarded as a dictator whose aim is to ensure nothing but permanency of the maintenance of his ideology and approaches in Cambodia and preparing his son for a potential acquisition of power and this assumption came to be true.

## **Predicting the Future Challenges and Scopes of the Current Political System**

### **Challenges:**

- Cambodia, under the leadership of Hun Manet, can face difficulties in maintaining bilateral relations with the west, especially the United States. The USA has always put effort to popularize democracy but Manet possessed power in a non-democratic way. This fact USA can consider while thinking about strengthening diplomatic ties with the country and also some European countries as well as Australia and New Zealand may also think in the same way as USA.<sup>12</sup>
- Many scholars who have expertise on matters related to political science have always stressed on the fact that when the power is transferred to a new person in a country that has a problematic democracy just like Cambodia, the fragile period might produce excessive political turbulence and the new leader might also face challenges during the time of establishing a relation based on mutual trust with his/her prime electorates and the military.
- Another key challenge for Hun Manet is that he is obscured by his fathers’s “strongman” legacy of stardom and competency that has influenced the country’s politics for nearly last four decades and this fact has a chance to overwhelm him and put extra pressure on him.<sup>13</sup>
- Manet needs to assure that there won’t be any split within CPP and also has to prove himself as capable to attract the young voters of the country as more than half of the population is comprised of them. But it is going to be very hard for him if he continues to

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<sup>12</sup>Sok Khemara, “Analysts: Cambodia’s New Leader Poses Dilemma for Western Powers”, Voice of America, September 2, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-cambodia-s-new-leader-poses-dilemma-for-western-powers-/7251595.html>

<sup>13</sup>Kimkong Heng, “Critical Questions Awaiting Cambodia’s Hun Manet”, Australian Institute of International Affairs, July 23, 2020, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/critical-questions-awaiting-cambodias-hun-manet/>

follow his father's legacy of suppressing the opposition as most of the young voters had craved for a competitive plebiscite prior to 2023 election.

### **Scopes:**

- Although how the USA and some other countries will deal with the new leadership of Cambodia is unclear, but China is providing all type of support to CPP including trade, aid, tourism, education etc. Hun Manet's recent visit to China (September 14-16, 2023) has even more strengthened both the countries relation as per as their commitment to advance their cooperation mainly in terms of politics and economy.<sup>14</sup>
- Cambodia's current political system is mainly facing resistance from the international community, advocates of democratic values and the youths within the country. But at present, the world is busy with so many crisis such as the Ukraine-Russia war, Israel-Palestine war etc. So there might be a chance for Hun Manet to function following the same approaches which were adopted by his father as the country's domestic factors might remain out of focus of the international community amidst so many international conflicts.
- Autocratic moves of Hun Manet and corruption which is already visible as he is trying to pacify the powerful people can intensify the anger of the Cambodians and also can create a way to restore democracy in the country by pressurizing the government through social movements initiated by the mass people, especially the youths.

### **Feasibility of the Return of Competitive Election in Cambodia in Future**

The Western democracies, specifically the United States can contribute a lot to reinstate competitive election in Cambodia in the upcoming period. But the USA has been trying to create a balance between geostrategic competition and promotion of democracy in this multipolar world

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<sup>14</sup>Sam Seun, "Hun Manet's Visit to China and the opportunities for Cambodia", September 14, 2023, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/hun-manets-visit-china-opportunities-cambodia-sam-seun-#:~:text=The%20two%20countries'%20bilateral%20relationship,cooperation%20and%20growth%20for%20Cambodia.>

order and so they need to look for other efficacious measures rather than coercive ones to convince Cambodia to step away from its policy of repressing the oppositions.<sup>15</sup>

Another perspective is that Hun Manet is completely a new leader and without any prior political experience he just cannot justify his right to rule just because he is the son of Hun Sen. He needs to realize that he has to prove that under his leadership or supervision, CPP can perform better even from before than any other party. For him to demonstrate this, a competitive election is the prerequisite. So from now, he should realize this fact and take preparation to uphold his worth and legitimacy.

In this case, the country's youths need to play a considerable role in creating pressure for returning competitive election. But if Manet manages to ensure high level economic development and modernization, there are chances that CPP under his rule can introduce a new ruling tactic combining both performance legitimacy and unfair election.

## Conclusion



Source: Voice of America

Hun Sen has converted Cambodia from a country which once used to decide its political fate by arranging competitive elections incorporating much political freedom to what is at present world's one of those countries that preserve repressive political system. Hun Manet better be smart enough to realize the drawbacks of the current feature of the politics and take steps to get

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<sup>15</sup> Mun Vong, "Can competitive elections come back to Cambodia?", East Asia Forum, September 5, 2023, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/09/05/can-competitive-elections-come-back-to-cambodia/>



rid of it. He should move forward assuring greater inclusivity in the political domain for being a legitimate leader mainly in the eyes of general people and also create ways for meaningful engagement with the international community.