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# Autopsy of a Cambodian Election

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## How Hun Sen Rules

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*Stéphanie Giry*

**K**hmer New Year is the closest thing Cambodia has to a High Holiday, and in April, Prime Minister Hun Sen celebrated it in style with his fiercest opponent. During a festival at the ancient temples of Angkor, he and Sam Rainsy ate together from a gigantic cake of sticky rice weighing more than four metric tons—a Guinness World Record. It was an uncanny scene, not least because the last time Sam Rainsy had made a major public appearance at Cambodia’s most glorious site, in September 2013, it was to call Hun Sen a cheat and a usurper.

On that day, Sam Rainsy and 55 members-elect of the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party were boycotting the inaugural session of the new National Assembly to protest alleged fraud in the recent general election, which the CNRP had officially lost by a small margin. With the ancestral temples bearing witness in the background, they called for an investigation, vowing “not to betray the will of the people.”

Cambodian politics appeared to be at an inflection point then, after years of civil war, military repression, totalitarianism, foreign occupation, an international trusteeship, and de facto one-party rule. By the government’s own tally of the votes, Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) had lost about one-quarter of its seats in the National Assembly. For months afterward, tens of thousands of Cambodians, led by the CNRP, took to the streets to pillory Hun Sen and ask him to resign. Yet today, the opposition cannot seem to get enough of rapprochement, touting a “culture

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of dialogue”—a phrase it repeats like a mantra—so far with little to show for it.

Has Hun Sen done it again? He has been Cambodia's prime minister for 30 years, in spite of his unseemly political origins. A one-time Khmer Rouge commander who defected, he was put in power in 1979 by Vietnam, Cambodia's historical enemy, after it toppled Pol Pot's regime. Hun Sen has remained in place after the advent of electoral democracy in 1993, even though his party has never won a majority of the popular vote in a general election, except in 2008, maybe—but the results of that election, like those of all the others, are disputed. Over the years, Hun Sen has coaxed or cowed, corrupted or co-opted, defanged, sidelined, or otherwise neutralized a large cast of adversaries, far and near.

Hun Sen has perfected the art of electoral authoritarianism without alienating Western donors ostensibly dedicated to the rule of law, while offsetting their influence by welcoming more and more investment from China. At once crass and deft, salt of the earth and grandiloquent, he is a remarkable political animal. But his longevity also reflects a distinct political culture—inspired by stories and folktales about mighty, wily kings and hares outwitting greater creatures—that rewards and glorifies the ambitious and the sly, the ruthless and the adaptable.

An autopsy of the 2013 election and its fallout suggests that even Hun Sen's opponents cannot entirely escape this conception of power. At the same time that Sam Rainsy and the CNRP pressed for multiparty democracy, liberalism, and human rights, they seemed to unwittingly adopt some of Hun Sen's ways. The opposition claimed to represent the people's will and the people's interests, but it sometimes treated its supporters with a paternalist instrumentalism that evoked manipulation more than emancipation. The CNRP practiced a half-baked form of nonviolent resistance that, instead of shaming the government for abusing its monopoly on force, wound up bowing to it. The party's appeals to nationalism and flirtations with anti-Vietnamese xenophobia were a gambit designed to contest Hun Sen's legitimacy, but in addition to courting real danger, they may have indirectly confirmed certain features of Hun Sen's self-mythology.

Perhaps it could hardly have been otherwise, given the CPP's lock on state resources. And the CNRP may have nudged along some overdue

reforms. But the opposition's tactics also seem to have confirmed that democratic contestation in Cambodia remains, at bottom, a struggle for power, and that serves Hun Sen above all.

### **THE PRIME MINISTER WHO WOULD BE KING**

The promise of multiparty democracy returned to Cambodia with elections in 1993, after the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and a UN-brokered peace accord that ended a long-running civil war. Immediately, however, the notion was trampled. Although the CPP lost the election to Funcinpec, a royalist party, Hun Sen wrangled a position as second prime minister, and in 1997, he staged a coup.

By then, the Khmer Rouge was still waging a guerrilla war but falling apart as a movement. Hun Sen hastened the group's disintegration with military strikes and offers to protect leaders who defected. This was a ploy not only to eliminate opponents but also to create for himself the persona of a grand pacifier and mastermind of national reconciliation.

Over the next decade, Hun Sen consolidated his power. He cordoned off rival factions within the CPP. He brought the royalists into a coalition and then cannibalized them. He maneuvered around the royal family—especially after 2004, when the formidable king, Norodom Sihanouk, aging and ailing, abdicated in favor of his feckless son Norodom Sihamoni.

Hun Sen also fought off the democratic opposition, by way of intimidation and lawsuits. His chief target was Sam Rainsy, a former financier trained in France who had served as Funcinpec's finance minister from 1993 to 1994 and then went on to head his own party, calling for clean government, workers' rights, and the rule of law. Sam Rainsy had earned an aura of half martyrdom by surviving a grenade attack in 1997 that killed more than a dozen people; Hun Sen saw him as an irritant.

By 2009, the prime minister was riding high. After the 2008 election, the CPP had a commanding majority in the National Assembly. A new UN-backed court was starting to try major Khmer Rouge figures but without troubling the former Khmer Rouge cadres now serving in Hun Sen's government. And then, Sam Rainsy did Hun Sen a favor. On a visit to the Vietnamese border, Sam Rainsy uprooted a post that he claimed violated the official boundary between Cambodia and Vietnam, a public relations stunt that earned him a prison

sentence for “racial incitement” and sent him into self-imposed exile. In 2010 came another, longer jail sentence—for falsifying maps and spreading disinformation—which ensured that he would have to stay away.

Over the next few years, Hun Sen grew only more secure, partly on the back of a brisk economy. Between 1993 and 2013, Cambodia’s average annual growth rate was 7.7 percent, the sixth-highest in the world. And during that period, the country’s poverty rate dropped. But growth also meant more concentrated wealth and opportunities for corporate plunder. A number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) claim that some 700,000 Cambodians have been adversely affected—many of them displaced and dispossessed—by the vast land concessions the government has granted to large companies.

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Human rights groups criticize the Hun Sen government for this practice, as well as other abuses—justifiably, but also sometimes with inexplicable ferocity, and disproportionately, it seems, compared with the way they treat the governments of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. This happens precisely because Cambodia is more open than its neighbors: the UN’s presence in the 1990s spawned a slew of NGOs, and foreign-language media (although not Khmer-language outlets) work largely unmolested. Call it the peril of partial toleration—and of having created a system that defies ready definitions.

Hun Sen has constructed an implausible composite regime, a kind of political chimera, that is part vestigial communism, part crony capitalism, part neofeudal paternalism, and part divine-right monarchism. The CPP, like other communist holdovers from the Cold War, conflates its own apparatus with the state. It oversees a top-to-bottom system of control over the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the security forces, and traditional media. It is secretive, opaque, and paranoid. The party runs the economy on an exploitative, clientelistic basis, at once predatory and patrimonial. The state delivers (or withholds) schools, hospitals, and roads to the population as though they were favors rather than public goods.

At the same time, Hun Sen has exalted the monarchy—the better, it seems, to bask in its mystique and usurp its symbolism. He especially

likes to compare himself to the sixteenth-century hero Sdech Kan, a commoner who became king after killing a king who wanted to kill him; he has had several statues of Sdech Kan built around the country, some in his own likeness. During Sihanouk's cremation in February 2013, King Sihamoni, the queen mother, and senior monks took turns trying to ignite the funeral pyre, but they all failed. When Hun Sen tried, it lit up immediately. A miracle, he said later, and a sign that he had "inherit[ed] the task of protecting the monarchy."

### **FROM SUBJECTS TO CITIZENS**

The prime minister who would be king entered the 2013 election season in full form. "If you love Hun Sen, if you pity Hun Sen, if you are satisfied with Hun Sen, if you believe in Hun Sen," he enjoined Cambodians, then "vote for the CPP." As in past elections, he campaigned on generalities about stability and progress and invoked the specter of the Khmer Rouge. He announced some populist measures: the monthly minimum wage of garment workers was increased; a new road was unveiled here, a new bridge there. He also issued threats. A land-titling campaign would end if the CPP were not reelected. Civil war might break out. "Change is not a game," Hun Sen said a month before the election.

Of the seven other parties in the race, the CNRP was the most important. But it was a fledgling party, and its standard-bearer was in self-imposed exile. It had been created just the year before, in the wake of the 2012 local elections, after the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party, which had been rivals, realized they could have outperformed the CPP in some areas if they had run under a single banner.

The CNRP presented a platform that was more a wish list than a program, pledging, among other things, higher wages for factory workers and civil servants, lower gas prices, and free health care for the poor. All of this would somehow be funded with money recovered by ending government graft—another crowd-pleasing promise. While Sam Rainsy was away, it was Kem Sokha, a veteran human rights advocate, who did most of the campaigning, while fending off a slew of dubious lawsuits meant to derail him.

In light of the CNRP's challenges, Hun Sen had good reason to feel secure—which may explain why, a couple of weeks before the election, he allowed Sam Rainsy to come home, as several Western governments



*Loyal opposition: Sam Rainsy with lawmakers in Phnom Penh, August 2014*

had been urging, by obtaining a royal pardon annulling Sam Rainsy’s prior convictions. After four years in self-imposed exile, Sam Rainsy, the opposition leader in dark-rimmed glasses, with the look of a dreamy, distracted professor, returned to Cambodia without fear of arrest—although too late to run in the election himself, or to even cast a ballot.

Sam Rainsy arrived on July 19, and despite the blackout on state media that day, he was greeted by a huge, ecstatic crowd. Tens of thousands of people lined the road all the way from the airport to the center of Phnom Penh, chanting, “*B’do!*”—“Change!” The last night of the campaign, there were competing party concerts: the CPP’s featured famous stars, smoke effects, portable toilets, and boxed meals; the CNRP’s featured a rickety platform, with a single spotlight, and half baguettes. This election would be a contest between entitlement and enthusiasm.

It was a very close call. On the evening of July 28, 2013, after an election day unusually light on violence, the CPP promptly announced that it had won 68 seats and that the CNRP had taken 55. (No other party in the running won any.) Almost as promptly, the CNRP claimed to have won 63 seats—and thus the election itself. Even going by the government’s figures, this was a searing rejection of Hun Sen: the CPP had lost 22 seats.

There were several reasons for the setback. Some 1.5 million voters were first-timers, and being young, they had little memory of major unrest; Hun Sen's pledge to maintain stability had little traction with them. Although Cambodia had become less poor, to many voters, it seemed more unfair. Urbanization, coupled with the explosion of social media, had heightened the awareness of inequality and of impunity for the rich.

Sam Rainsy had also cleverly exploited widespread anti-Vietnamese sentiment. The CPP's common characterization of Vietnam as Cambodia's savior from the Khmer Rouge runs against the widely shared view among Cambodians that their neighbor is an invader and pilferer. Sam Rainsy had raged against abusive land concessions by claiming that they favored Vietnamese companies. This was true, if incomplete—Chinese companies may benefit even more—but the claim was a half argument that turned prejudice into righteousness.

Sihanouk's death in October 2012 may also have boosted the anti-CPP vote. Over the lengthy mourning period that followed, thousands of Cambodians of all ages, all classes, and all parts of the country had gathered in front of the royal palace to pay homage to the king. A French reporter based in Cambodia since 1999 told me that period was the first time she had heard so many people seem so disaffected, and say so openly—and now, they lamented, Sihanouk, the only real counterweight to Hun Sen, was gone. Footage broadcast to commemorate Sihanouk's heyday in the 1960s—images of large factories, immaculate schools, and all-girl rock bands—also made an impression: life under the CPP was better than it had been under the Khmer Rouge, but it could be better still.

The political analyst Lao Mong Hay, who is in his 70s, almost choked up when he told me after the election that he had never seen Cambodians so fearless and free. At long last, he said, they had gone from "being subjects" to "becoming citizens."

### **MOST FREE AND LEAST FAIR**

With the CNRP claiming fraud, it was invested with a double mandate: not only had Cambodians voted for the party in unprecedented numbers, but then they had been cheated of the real results. Nationwide, the difference between the CPP and the CNRP was only about 290,000 votes, out of approximately 6.6 million cast, and before the

election, NGOs had warned of major structural problems affecting many more people than that. The names of more than one million eligible voters seemed to be missing from the official rosters. Yet the lists contained 250,000 exact duplicates. And local authorities, most of whom were CPP members, had distributed some 290,000 temporary voting cards after the registration period. The National Democratic Institute later reported that an inordinately high number of votes were cast for the CPP by voters using temporary cards. Koul Panha, head of the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia, a watchdog group that sent out 11,000 monitors on voting day, told me that if the 2013 election had been “the most free” in Cambodia’s history, it had also been “the least fair.”

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But fraud is a tricky thing to prove or even identify. The name of one of Kem Sokha’s daughters appeared on the registries of two districts—yet if the CPP had had a master plan, presumably it would not have involved her voting twice. The supposedly indelible ink used to identify voters could be washed off with a five-minute bleach treatment. But that was the case also for the ink at the polling station used by Kem Sokha, and if there was one place in the entire country where any election riggers would have made sure to use good ink, it was there.

The difficulties of proving wrongdoing seemed like yet another major hurdle for the CNRP’s leaders—but then again, if you can’t measure it, you might as well exaggerate it. After all, while getting incensed over cheating in general terms would help them rally their supporters, not dwelling on the details would leave them room to negotiate with the CPP. About a month after the election, Sam Rainsy told me that at first, the CNRP’s leaders claimed to have won because they were “on hot coals.” Now he preferred to say, “The spirit that truly reflects the situation is that there are two winners on an equal footing.” The CNRP was still calling for an investigation, but only into irregularities on election day and during ballot counting. This would redistribute a few seats at most—allowing both the CPP to stay in power and the CNRP to enter the National Assembly without looking like a sellout.

One could call this a victory of pragmatism over principle and laud the realism of the CNRP's leaders for looking ahead rather than risk stalling on a lost cause. But the move reeked of petty politicking. The CNRP wasn't openly explaining its strategy to the people whose votes had brought it this far and whose will it claimed to represent.

### **PEOPLE POWER?**

Aside from a couple of speeches, Hun Sen was mostly quiet in the weeks after the election. Rumors circulated of stunned confusion among the CPP's leaders (how could voters be so ungrateful?) and of growing rifts within the party. Officially, however, the CPP was proceeding with its new mandate in all formality, insisting that any complaints about the election should be addressed to the relevant authorities—none with a reputation for independence. The CNRP countered by announcing that it would boycott the National Assembly until an investigation was conducted. And in September, it started staging mass rallies in Freedom Park, an awkward expanse of tiled concrete in Phnom Penh designated by the government as an appropriate venue for free expression.

At times, the gatherings felt like town-hall meetings; at other times, like country fairs. While onstage politicians made speeches and ordinary people shared their grievances, hawkers waded through the crowd selling steamed clams and cubes of sugar cane. As the occasional daytime rallies turned into overnight sit-ins, the countryside seemed to take over the city. The students and young office workers who had dominated pre-election gatherings gave way to peasants with brittle bodies and pruned faces.

The rallies were small and civil compared to the ones that toppled governments in Egypt and Ukraine in recent years, but for Cambodia, they were without precedent in scale and daring. How long would Hun Sen put up with such defiance? The CNRP was scrupulous about stating its commitment to nonviolence. At the same time, it tolerated, and sometimes seemed to stoke, anti-Vietnamese sentiment. Comedians were allowed to perform incendiary skits on the stage at Freedom Park. Considering that the most serious brawls reported on election day—near lynchings—had targeted people suspected of being Vietnamese, this smacked of easy populism and seemed irresponsible.

It also seemed like an implicit admission of weakness. The CNRP was up against the CPP's vast machinery, with few means to match it.

Even the CNRP's main asset, popular support, had a shortcoming: the party was trying to ride a protest vote—a vote that hadn't endorsed it so much as rejected Hun Sen. And in its attempt to leverage something that wasn't entirely its to claim, at times the CNRP betrayed a view of the masses that was not only instrumentalist and patronizing but also almost feudal in its assumptions about the relationship between people and power.

One day in late September, the opposition dispatched supporters to ask the king to rescind a letter formally convening the new National Assembly. A dozen women sat by barricades a couple of blocks away from the royal palace guarding boxes with petitions stamped with 265,788 thumbprint marks, they claimed. They were waiting for a representative of the palace to accept the delivery. Clouds gathered, a drizzle threatening, and a blue tarp was thrown over the boxes. Finally, someone came out to say that the king would hear the people's plea. A rickshaw was commissioned, the heavy boxes were stacked high onto the single seat, and the scrawny driver rode off toward the royal gate, his charge teetering.

A few days later, the National Assembly met as planned, without the opposition. Yet in late October, the CNRP again sent out supporters bearing petitions to appeal to a higher authority. Hundreds of demonstrators marched to the UN's human rights office to deliver a truckful of papers demanding an investigation into the July election: two million thumbprints, allegedly, representing almost 13 percent of the country's total population. The boxes sat in a storage room for weeks, awaiting a bill of lading from UN headquarters in New York.

So much for Lao Mong Hay's hope that Cambodia's subjects had finally become citizens; on those occasions, they were cast in the role of supplicants—and to little effect. As the fall wore on, more and more states formally recognized Hun Sen's new government. Their diplomats in Phnom Penh were growing frustrated with the CNRP's antics, wishing the party would just take its seats in parliament and get down to the hard work of being an opposition party. The crowd in Freedom Park was starting to thin.

### **PRISONER'S DILEMMA**

The CPP, for its part, was regrouping. A few of the party's more worldly and dynamic members were brought into the government. The Commerce Ministry announced a campaign to cut back on

unofficial payments by automating the filings that all businesses have to make. The education budget was increased. One cabinet member told me then that the election results had been “a wake-up call”; the party’s survival depended on accelerating reform.

But there were obstacles. Tackling large-scale corruption would unsettle the patronage networks that prop up CPP elites. Going after small-time graft might please Cambodians fed up with petty shake-downs, but it could alienate bureaucrats, who are underpaid and

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need the extra cash. There was also the knock-on effect of rising expectations: when garment workers asked for a wage increase to more than \$150 per month, teachers asked for \$250, and civil servants for \$500. Some

weeks earlier, I had asked Sam Rainsy if he worried that the CPP might undermine the CNRP by getting ahead of its program. He had answered: “The problem is more complicated. Hun Sen isn’t just the head of a system; he is its prisoner.”

By late fall, it looked like Sam Rainsy was a prisoner of that system, too. The CNRP was making little headway on negotiations with the CPP, even after downgrading its conditions for taking its seats in the National Assembly—now, basically, it was demanding only to receive a television license and the presidency of some parliamentary commissions. If the CNRP ever came to power, given its limited experience in government, it would have to rely on bureaucrats loyal to the CPP. Even the opposition’s policy of nonviolence was held hostage to its assumption, widely shared, that at any moment the government might still resort to force.

Hun Sen is often called “the strongman of Cambodia,” but that label undersells his government’s skill at calibrating violence. After an initial display of troops, water cannons, and barricades with razor wire in response to the postelection protests, state security forces had pulled back to a remarkable extent. But there were a few brutish crackdowns on small protests far from Freedom Park—just a reminder. And Hun Sen would occasionally warn of the mysterious “third hand,” code for thugs, infiltrators, and agents provocateurs, who might cause trouble for the demonstrators.

Yet in late December, the CNRP doubled down, announcing that it would hold regular marches until Hun Sen resigned and early elections

were scheduled. Around then, the garment workers' movement stirred. A group of independent unions announced a mass strike until the minimum wage was raised from \$80 per month to \$160—the government's own estimate, roughly, of a living wage. Since the industry accounts for around 80 percent of Cambodia's export revenues, that could mean a major economic disruption. Sam Rainsy went to a factory area by the Vietnamese border and encouraged workers to strike: "We have to be together. I support all of you until you reach success. And I'll be with you and protect you all."

The CNRP's parade on December 29 through the heart of Phnom Penh was its largest demonstration yet, perhaps 100,000 strong, and it was the first time garment workers joined en masse. The Ministry of Labor, which had just announced an increase in the workers' minimum wage, to \$95 per month, now raised it to \$100, while demanding that the striking workers return to their factories no later than January 2. That day, a protest at a plant on the outskirts of Phnom Penh was repressed by an elite paramilitary unit. Another protest at a nearby plant degenerated—with bonfires and looting—and the next day, security forces quashed it by shooting into the crowd, killing five people.

The day after that, bullet casings, allegedly from the factory shooting, were put on display at the CNRP's headquarters. Sam Rainsy condemned the killings and reaffirmed the party's commitment to nonviolence. But he also made a lengthy, coldly mathematical case demonstrating that the minimum wage could be raised to \$160 per month without undercutting Cambodia's competitiveness. The CNRP, he said, backed the cause of garment workers by offering them "arguments" and "intellectual support." Considering the deadly events of the day before, it was a kind of support that sounded a lot like distancing.

If Sam Rainsy's message was intended as a gesture of conciliation to Hun Sen, it was too subtle or it came too late. Just hours after he delivered it, state security forces and masked thugs wielding batons and metal pipes raced into Freedom Park and forcibly flushed it of opposition supporters. The authorities issued a ban on any assemblies of more than ten people.

The raid on Freedom Park stripped the opposition of its greatest showcase. But it also exposed the government's ruthless defensiveness. The result was a draw of sorts. Sam Rainsy had the people on his side, and Hun Sen had state force, but neither was decisive.

## **THE COSTS OF COMPROMISE**

The spring of 2014 was quiet, predictably. Some activists were arrested. Security forces were congratulated. While Sam Rainsy toured foreign capitals, Mu Sochua, a former minister of women's and veterans affairs and a CNRP member who had won a seat in parliament, started a one-woman campaign to reclaim Freedom Park, staging repeat solo sit-ins there. On July 15, she went with reinforcements. There was a clash and arrests. Sam Rainsy flew back from abroad, and within days struck a bargain with Hun Sen: the government would release the CNRP members who had been arrested, and everyone would finally take their seats in the National Assembly. The "culture of dialogue" was born.

For the CPP, the benefits were obvious: an end to this crisis, a sop to foreign investors, and a chance to co-opt the CNRP. For the opposition, the results were more mixed. Kem Sokha would become the vice president of the National Assembly. The CNRP would head five parliamentary commissions, including a new one devoted to anticorruption. A new election commission, tasked with drawing up entirely new voter lists, would be set up. But many of these gains were symbolic, and the more significant ones hinged on details of implementation that were to be determined later.

The deal also exposed the CNRP's weaknesses. Senior members and party advisers complained that Sam Rainsy had struck the deal with Hun Sen without consulting them enough. The new election commission would not include members from any political parties other than the CPP and the CNRP. Mu Sochua later justified this to me by saying that no other party had won any seats in the 2013 election—never mind the idea that smaller actors should have a say in shaping the system. The CNRP's objective wasn't pluralism, or even leveling the playing field; it was securing power.

A year later, the CNRP has obtained a license to operate a television station, but the permit is up for renewal annually. Although all the CNRP activists who were jailed have been released, the cases against them are "frozen," as Sam Rainsy put it, meaning that they could be reactivated. The new election commission must re-register an estimated ten million eligible voters in time for local elections in early 2017. As of July, however, its next secretary-general—the person in charge of the administration that will oversee the actual registration—had not been selected. For the time

being, the incumbent from the old, suspect commission remained in the post.

The National Assembly has passed a raft of laws that many NGOs have decried for reining in civil society and trade unions. The CNRP has objected to these bills, sometimes with vehemence. But its commitment to the “culture of dialogue” acts as a cap on such criticism. After a legislator from the CNRP questioned the administration of the Red Cross, which is headed by Hun Sen’s wife, the prime minister challenged Sam Rainsy to take an oath at a famous shrine and vow to “die through bullets, lightning and everything” if that accusation—or the ones about the 2013 election being rigged—turned out to be wrong.

The CNRP’s leaders seem to have tied their own hands, and this is alienating some supporters, most visibly on social media and among Cambodians in the United States, a significant source of funding. When I spoke to him in late June, Kem Sokha estimated that the CNRP’s rapprochement with Hun Sen may have cost the party ten percent of its backers and that another 50 percent were skeptical, waiting to see concrete results.

Mu Sochua, however, was crediting the “culture of dialogue” with enabling the CNRP to “penetrate the base” and start building up support for the local elections in 2017 and the general election in 2018. With détente now an official policy of the government, she explained, CPP agents were no longer intimidating opposition supporters.

For Sam Rainsy, the CNRP has time on its side: the population of Cambodia is getting younger, and that demographic shift, he believes, can only serve his party. But his talk of happy inevitability suggests a different kind of resignation. In an interview in late June, he invoked the end of apartheid in South Africa, amnesties, and truth and reconciliation commissions to argue that Hun Sen needed assurances that he would not be prosecuted after leaving power. And the more Sam Rainsy talked about ways to encourage Hun Sen to step down, the more he seemed to be at the man’s mercy.

## **VIETNAM SYNDROME**

Hun Sen has shown little sign of wanting to go. During the CPP’s congress in June, his candidacy for 2018 was announced and he was elected party president, in place of his longtime rival Chea Sim, who had recently died. The interior minister, a protégé and brother-in-law

of Chea Sim, was promoted to vice president—as was a longtime CPP operative with detailed knowledge of the party apparatus. The CPP was closing ranks. Already, it had promoted the children of some party bigwigs and vastly expanded its Central Committee to include many officers and officials with command authority over security forces.

It was also continuing to undertake reforms, especially in areas readily visible to ordinary people, such as education. The minimum wage for garment workers had gone up to \$128 per month, and David Welsh, a labor rights activist, forecast other increases—although probably no significant ones until just before the next election. According to the political scientist Kheang Un, the CPP dispatched working groups after the 2013 election to sound out constituents regardless of their political affiliation. The party finally seemed to understand that it must be more responsive to the needs of more people, not just its supporters.

Whether or not these measures can win back Cambodians who voted for the CNRP in 2013, they are reminders of the stark disparity in resources available to the two parties—a vast gap that may explain why the CNRP often winds up having to play Hun Sen's game and, perhaps inevitably, adopts confused views and shoddy tactics. When, for example, Sam Rainsy says that the CNRP is committed to nonviolence, he doesn't just mean that the party won't resort to violence; he also means that it doesn't want its supporters to suffer any violence themselves. But how strong is a nonviolent movement that refuses to take a hit? And so at the same time that Sam Rainsy repeatedly called for calm, he also seemed to be playing with fire, cooly. He embraced the workers' movement and appealed to anti-Vietnamese sentiment as though he wouldn't mind sparking a revolution, but only with plausible deniability. (An uprising? Who, me?)

Today, as ever, the most explosive issue for Cambodians is Vietnam—in particular, its alleged encroachment on Cambodian territory and the illegal immigration of Vietnamese to Cambodia. It is also, of course, the most embarrassing issue for Hun Sen: an awkward reminder that he was first installed in office by the enemy. In June, the CNRP was busy trying to exploit this, with some of its legislators leading groups of supporters to areas of the border that were being demarcated and clashing with Vietnamese officials and residents there.

Yet getting Cambodians riled up over sovereignty issues also plays into Hun Sen's hands. In response to the CNRP's border visits, the Cambodian government promptly sent formal notes of complaint to Vietnam and started cracking down on undocumented immigrants, with unprecedented sweeps, roundups, and deportations. Hun Sen also asked UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for access to authoritative colonial-era maps of Cambodia that the UN possesses. They were needed, Hun Sen claimed, in order to monitor the boundary's delimitation, as well as curb the "incitement of extreme nationalism" in "some quarters." As ever, Hun Sen was portraying himself as a guarantor of stability.

During my last interview with Sam Rainsy, in late June, I asked him about the CPP's apparent attempts to get ahead of the CNRP again—this time on the Vietnam question. "All the better," he answered; were the CPP to implement the CNRP's policies, it would be a "political and moral victory" for the party and an "ultimate victory" for the Cambodian people. But it would also be a personal victory for Hun Sen: finally taking a stand against Vietnam is his best chance to redeem his legitimacy as well as burnish his legacy. 🌐