

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

[Cambodia Certifies Hun Sen's Disputed Poll Victory](#)

Opposition Pledges to Keep Fighting For U.N. Investigation Into Election

By CHUN HAN WONG And SUN NARIN, 08 Sept 2013

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia—Cambodia's election commission on Sunday certified a slim election win for long-ruling Prime Minister Hun Sen despite a mass weekend protest staged by a galvanized opposition movement to challenge the result.

A day after more than 20,000 people gathered in the capital Phnom Penh to hold one of the Southeast Asian country's largest opposition rallies in recent years, the National Election Committee released official tallies affirming Mr. Hun Sen's party had won 68 seats to the opposition's 55 in the July 28 vote, confirming a preliminary count in August and a sharply reduced parliamentary majority for the ruling Cambodian People's Party.

Sunday's official result closed doors on legal challenges to the outcome of the election, which has been marred by allegations of widespread voting fraud amid competing claims to victory from the CPP and the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party. The political standoff could continue for months, analysts say, should the CNRP try to delay the forming of a new government by boycotting Parliament.

At a Sunday news briefing, CNRP leader Sam Rainsy rejected the official result and pledged more protests—longer, larger and nationwide—to press for a United Nations-backed investigation into alleged election irregularities.

"We will continue to protest to seek justice for the people," Mr. Rainsy, a 64-year-old former finance minister who was denied candidacy in the July vote, told reporters. "We shall boycott the new parliamentary session. If CPP still proceeds to form a government, it would be an illegal one," he said, adding that his party would stage a demonstration lasting at least three days from Sept. 15.

His comments mirrored pledges made by CNRP leaders at Saturday's protest held at Phnom Penh's Freedom Park, at which flag- and placard-waving opposition supporters shouted "change, change" and chanted slogans that called for nonviolent dissent against Mr. Hun Sen, Cambodia's 61-year-old strongman. Police officials said tens of thousands of security personnel were deployed across the capital to maintain order, though no violence was reported.

The CPP, meanwhile, pressed opposition leaders to accept the outcome. "The result has been formally declared so there is no more need for protest. The NEC and Constitutional Council have dealt with the election irregularities," CPP lawmaker Cheam Yeap told The Wall Street Journal. "We respect the people's will and are open to negotiations with the CNRP. But if they boycott Parliament, the CPP will lead the country alone."

Official results show the CPP receiving 48.8% of the 6.63 million ballots cast, or about 3.24 million votes, compared with the CNRP's 44.5%, or about 2.92 million votes. The ruling party's vote share fell from

58.1% in 2008, a decline political analysts attributed to deepening disenchantment over rural land conflicts, high youth unemployment and widening social inequity.

The CNRP—formed last year by a merger of two opposition parties—has claimed that it won 63 seats in the 123-member National Assembly, enough for overall victory and up from 29 taken by its constituent groups five years ago.

Mr. Rainsy, a French-educated former banker, on Sunday repeated his calls for a U.N.-led probe into alleged election irregularities, and said his party would respect the findings of such an internationally backed panel even if it ruled a victory for the CPP.

Cambodia's election commission—which has close ties to the CPP—has so far rejected this demand, saying it would contravene constitutional laws. The commission has said its own investigations found some irregularities that weren't significant enough to sway the final result.

The vote, Cambodia's fifth since the U.N. reintroduced competitive elections in 1993 after decades of civil war, marked the CPP's worst showing since 1998. While opposition protests haven't altered the election's outcome, political analysts say the strong turnout could compel the CPP, which has governed since 1979 independently and through coalitions, to do more to address socioeconomic concerns.

"The rally serves as a tool for the opposition to bargain and negotiate with the CPP, and will put pressure on the ruling party," said Chea Vannath, a Cambodian sociologist and political analyst.

Mr. Hun Sen, already prime minister for 28 years, is credited for restoring stability and economic growth to his impoverished nation, but has also been accused of quashing dissent through violence and intimidation. He has said his party has enough lawmakers to override any opposition parliamentary boycott and form a new government. But some legal experts, including those from legal-aid group Cambodian Defenders Project, say the constitution allows the opposition to block the process by declining to take its parliamentary seats.

Mr. Hun Sen faced a similar political stalemate in 2003, when his CPP failed to win the required two-thirds parliamentary majority for forming a government on its own. He broke the political deadlock 11 months later by forging a coalition with the royalist Funcinpec party.

"Political risks have risen in the short term," said Douglas Clayton, chief executive at Leopard Capital, a private-equity firm that invests in frontier markets. But in the long run, "the move towards multiparty democracy reduces Cambodia's 'key man' political risks, and points the way toward better governance and transparency.

"Time is on the opposition's side. Cambodia's voter base gets younger every year, as the population's average age is just 22," Mr. Clayton said. "The CPP has to figure out how to connect with the postwar generation, or start planning their retirement."