

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

# Cambodian Opposition Gains in Elections

*Ruling Cambodian People's Party Set to Lose Two-Thirds Parliamentary Majority*

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

July 29, 2013

[CHUN HAN WONG](#)

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia—Cambodia's opposition scored significant gains in general elections Sunday, signaling greater vibrancy in the country's political system, although longtime Prime Minister Hun Sen remains firmly in power.

The ruling Cambodian People's Party likely won 68 of 123 legislative seats, dropping from the 90 it won five years ago, early results showed. This means Mr. Hun Sen's party would lose its two-thirds majority, giving opposition forces greater sway in the lawmaking process, and marking the first time the CPP has lost seats after showing gains in every vote since the United Nations reintroduced competitive elections to this once war-torn nation in 1993.

The opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party won 55 seats—a leap from the 29 won in 2008 by opposition groups that merged last year to form the CNRP.

Analysts say the magnitude of opposition gains, which surpassed expectations, puts pressure on Mr. Hun Sen to address growing socioeconomic tensions.

## **Election Day in Cambodia**

"Cambodians have shown that they want a stronger balancing voice in parliament to counter the government," said Kem Ley, a Cambodian social-development researcher and political analyst. "People don't have confidence in the CPP's ability to steer their country's progress."

Mr. Hun Sen, currently Asia's longest-serving prime minister, and his party had built strong loyalties in many parts of Cambodia, particularly rural areas, helped by their record of bringing political stability and presiding over annual economic growth of about 6% to 7% in recent years.

But his standing has been hurt by growing anger over rural land conflicts, corruption, as well as urban disenchantment with high youth unemployment and decades of, in effect, one-party rule. Many Cambodians also worry that the country's development

model isn't sustainable, given its heavy reliance upon garment manufacturing and agribusinesses that have provided jobs but also led to social dislocation and environmental degradation.

The opposition, led by 64-year-old former Finance Minister Sam Rainsy, had pledged to address these concerns in an energetic campaign that analysts say resonated with young urbanites and rural residents wary of increasing commercial encroachment in the countryside.

"This result is a wake-up call for the ruling party," said Douglas Clayton, chief executive at Leopard Capital, a private-equity firm that invests in frontier markets. "They will have to step back and re-examine their whole approach to governance, and put forward some fresh faces to reshape the party's image."



European Pressphoto Agency

Mr. Hun Sen hasn't commented on the preliminary results, which point to the CPP's worst showing since 1998 when it won 64 of 122 seats. Mr. Rainsy, barred by officials from contesting Sunday's vote in what he called a politically motivated move, appealed for "peace and reconciliation" in comments made as results were coming in. Official tallies for the election are expected later in the week.

About 9.6 million Cambodians, of which more than a third were less than 30 years old, were eligible to vote in this year's election—the country's fifth since a 1991 cease-fire ended decades of civil war and genocide. The campaign was the country's most peaceful yet, [although violence broke out](#) at a Phnom Penh polling station Sunday as some residents clashed with state security forces after complaining that they couldn't find their names on voter lists.

Opposition leaders and rights activists alleged the CPP won by using unfair tactics, including suppressing media freedom and intimidating voters. The ruling party has

challenged opposition accusers to produce evidence of fraud to the National Election Committee—a nominally independent agency that is led by officials closely linked to the CPP.

Some eligible voters had been unable to cast ballots because their names were left off official voter lists, or because others had fraudulently voted in their place, opposition leaders and rights activists said. Ink used to mark voters' fingers to prevent repeat voting was easily removable, according to Comfrel, a local election watchdog.