



An Overview and Analysis of the Current Political Situation in Cambodia

I. Executive Summary

This Paper provides a brief overview and analysis of the current political situation in Cambodia, focusing on the strategies being employed by each major player, the historical trends behind these methods and the risks they pose for Cambodia. It first provides a brief overview of the 2012 Commune Council elections and the 2013 national elections, then summarizes the litany of political developments – and particularly, the threats leveraged against the opposition – starting during the second half of 2015 and leading up to the present, and finally provides an analysis of the different strategies being utilized by the main political parties – the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) – before providing a summary of the potential risks for Cambodia if it continues down its current path. This Paper has been produced by Future Forum, an independent public policy think tank founded in 2015.¹

II. Introduction – A New Hope: The 2012 and 2013 Elections

In the eyes of many observers and much of the electorate, 2012 and 2013 had promised so much. First Sam Rainsy’s eponymous Sam Rainsy Party and Kem Sokha’s Human Rights Party merged in 2012 to form a united opposition.² Then, in 2013, in the build-up to the 28 July elections, Cambodia’s hitherto disengaged youth demanded change; they had been mobilized and had begun to turn the tide of autocratic rule.³

However, amid allegations of widespread election fraud and voter intimidation by election monitors,⁴ the CPP just about clung on to power, winning 68 seats to the CNRP’s 55.⁵ Down from 90 seats, this dramatic shift represented a serious blow to the CPP’s credibility, self-confidence and constituency. But the CNRP believed that it had in fact won a slim outright majority and in fact would have won a huge majority if the elections had been genuinely free and fair.⁶ As tensions escalated, with military helicopters circling and tanks rumbling

¹ Any questions regarding this Paper can be directed at info@futureforum.asia. This is a summary of a long paper, which provides in-depth analysis; please contact Future Forum for access to the full-length document.

² Vong Sokheng and Bridget di Certo, ‘Parties to form Cambodia Democratic Movement of National Rescue’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 17 July 2012, <http://bit.ly/2dkgiHG>.

³ Parameswaran Ponnudurai, ‘Disenchanted Young Cambodians Flex Their Muscle in Elections’, *Radio Free Asia*, 29 July 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dxd8uA>.

⁴ The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL), ‘Democracy, Elections and Reform in Cambodia’ (2013 Annual Report), Phnom Penh, April 2014, pp.18-22, <http://bit.ly/2e1To2Z>.

⁵ ____, ‘Big opposition gains’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 29 July 2013, <http://bit.ly/2eB0o8A>.

⁶ Shane Worrell, ‘Opposition claims majority win’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 31 July 2013, <http://bit.ly/2dY44OI>.

ominously towards the capital,⁷ the CNRP and its supporters challenged the official narrow victory of the ruling CPP by rallying unprecedented mass protests.⁸

Furthermore, the CNRP refused to take up its seats in the National Assembly unless its demands were satisfied: a thorough and independent investigation into election irregularities.⁹ Despite an initial crackdown on 15 September 2013, when one man was shot dead and several seriously injured,¹⁰ the mass protests lasted several months relatively peacefully until early January 2014,¹¹ when garment factory workers and unions joined forces with the CNRP.¹² At that point, the authorities lost patience: state security forces fired into a crowd of protesting garment workers, killing four people and injuring many more.¹³ Furthermore, the authorities dispersed all CNRP supporters and activists from their base in Phnom Penh's Freedom Park, banned all street demonstrations, with the result that Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha went into hiding.¹⁴ The violence served its purpose: the protestors melted away; the CNRP was critically weakened and left strategically floundering.

On 22 July 2014, almost a year after the disputed elections, Sam Rainsy made a deal with Hun Sen to break the political deadlock.¹⁵ The CNRP National Assembly representatives would end their ten-month parliamentary boycott, take up their seats and quietly drop their objections to the election results, sweetened by promises of electoral reform ahead of the 2018 elections and by prestigious National Assembly positions.¹⁶ And so began the so-called "culture of dialogue," an attempt by the CPP and the CNRP to be more cooperative and less antagonistic towards each other, but one which imploded only a year later.

III. Recent Events: 2014 Onwards

Pushed right to the edge during the 2013 national elections, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ruling Cambodian People's Party appeared to have regained political control by mid-2014. The 22 July 2014 political agreement between the CNRP and the CPP lacked many details that would have made it strong and instead spoke of reforms in broad strokes; reform of the National Election Committee (NEC), which had been one of the opposition's main demands,

⁷ Parameswaran Ponnudurai and Samean Yun, 'Cambodian Opposition Chief Blasts Military Build-Up in Capital', *Radio Free Asia*, 16 August 2013, <http://bit.ly/2e3YD1b>.

⁸ Kate Hodal, 'Cambodian election protests grip Phnom Penh', *The Guardian*, 16 September 2013, <http://bit.ly/2e0lrFF>.

⁹ Vong Sokheng, 'King to open assembly on September 23', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 10 September 2013, <http://bit.ly/2eihN6x>.

¹⁰ ____, 'Protest takes dark turn', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 16 September 2013, <http://bit.ly/2e40Tsl>.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Om5NulU5nko>.

¹² Shane Worrell, Mom Kunthea and Meas Sokchea, 'Protest paths converge', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 26 December 2013, <http://bit.ly/2e3ZceH>.

¹³ Cheang Sokha, Sean Teehan and Shane Worrell, 'Crackdown turns deadly', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 3 January 2014, <http://bit.ly/2dY6w81>.

¹⁴ Parameswaran Ponnudurai and Samean Yun, 'Cambodian Opposition Leaders Go Into Hiding Amid Protest Crackdown', *Radio Free Asia*, 4 January 2014, <http://bit.ly/2eMbqqT>.

¹⁵ Meas Sokchea and Kevin Ponniah, 'One year in the making', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 23 July 2014, <http://bit.ly/2egj22v>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

was a far cry from true electoral reform that could have ensured free and fair elections in 2018.

In other words, the CPP managed to get the CNRP parliamentarians to take up their seats in the National Assembly, thus restoring credibility to the Cambodian government and to quell the street protests that had continued to plague the government since the elections, without sacrificing much. Yet, over the second half of 2015, an unexpected and aggressive crackdown against the CNRP started, which included violence, intimidation and judicial harassment. While on one hand, this crackdown was somewhat unexpected as it came with no warning or other obvious indication it was coming, mid-term crackdowns have been recurring throughout Cambodia's recent political history..

First, on 21 July 2015, CNRP activists were convicted of “insurrection” for taking part in anti-government protests in 2014.¹⁷ Then, on 15 August 2015, a prominent Sam Rainsy Party Senator,¹⁸ Hong Sok Hour, was arrested and imprisoned two days after being accused of treason by Hun Sen,¹⁹ and was charged with forgery and incitement.²⁰ On 26 October 2015, two CNRP MPs, Nhay Chamroeun and Kong Saphea, were pulled from their cars outside the National Assembly, savagely beaten by thugs while the police looked on, and hospitalized with serious injuries.²¹ Three of the perpetrators, all Cambodian military, were charged over the incident,²² while onlookers identified plain-clothes police and security guards as accomplices in the beatings,²³ and convicted on 27 May 2016 and given a four-year prison term, although they were released by November 2016.²⁴

This act of violence occurred directly after mass protests erupted outside the National Assembly, as over a thousand people called for the ousting of CNRP Vice-President Kem Sokha as Vice President of the National Assembly.²⁵ The same day, a mob targeted Kem Sokha's house, hurling rocks and water bottles at it for hours while his wife hid indoors,

¹⁷ Meas Sokchea, ‘CNRP activists sentenced for “insurrection”’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 21 July 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dodro5>.

¹⁸ The Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), led by Sam Rainsy, was one of two political parties that merged in 2012 to form the CNRP (also led by Sam Rainsy). As a Senator, Hong Sok Hour was elected on 29 January 2012, before the 2012 merger, and thus still represents the SRP.

¹⁹ Cheang Sokha, ‘Senator Hong Sok Hour arrested’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 15 August 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dXVTCb>.

²⁰ Meas Sokchea, ‘SRP's Sok Hour arrested’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 17 August 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dx6nJk>.

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIqa5Mad7Sc>.

²² Buth Reaksmeay Kongkea, Khouth Sophak Chakrya and Shaun Turton, ‘Three RCAF members charged for beatings’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 5 November 2015, <http://bit.ly/2egjf5u>.

²³ ‘Joint Statement: ADHOC, CCHR, CCIM, CLEC, STT and LICADHO condemn violence against MPs’, 27 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/2eqdqIK>.

²⁴ Mech Dara and Shaun Turton, ‘MP attackers promoted’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 28 December 2016, <http://bit.ly/2i8qHED>.

²⁵ Khouth Sophak Chakrya, Charles Parkinson and Shaun Turton, ‘Lawmakers beaten at National Assembly’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 27 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/2eqf86J>.

fearing for her life.²⁶ When the police were telephoned to provide urgent assistance, they reportedly remained deaf to these pleas.²⁷ Four days later, Kem Sokha was indeed unseated as Vice-President of the National Assembly, after an all-CPP vote that was boycotted by the CNRP National Assembly members.²⁸

Then, on 13 November 2015, CNRP leader Sam Rainsy was issued with an arrest warrant in connection with an old case brought by Foreign Minister Hor Namhong dating back to 2008.²⁹ The arrest warrant followed a war of words the previous day, 12 November 2015, when Hun Sen called Sam Rainsy the “*son of a traitor*”³⁰ – in reference to his father Sam Sary, a former minister of then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk.³¹ Three days later, Sam Rainsy – who was abroad at the time and decided to stay after the warrant was issued – was stripped of his position as National Assembly representative, and with it, of his parliamentary immunity.³²

That same week, on 20 November 2015, a now-exposed Sam Rainsy was hit with new provisional charges of being an accomplice to the crimes of forging a public document, using a forged document, and inciting serious turmoil, in connection with the aforementioned Hong Sok Hour case.³³ Then, on 1 December 2015, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court issued a further summons at the behest of National Assembly President Heng Samrin, ordering Sam Rainsy to clarify another politically provocative Facebook post that he made in November, and to appear for questioning on a new defamation charge.³⁴

2016 has seen a similar flurry of legal action and threats of violence against the opposition. On 18 March 2016, new court summons were issued for Sam Rainsy in yet another lawsuit against him, this time over a complaint filed by CPP minister Som Soeun, whom Sam Rainsy had accused earlier that month of being involved in an alleged plan to hire poor people in India and Philippines to “like” Hun Sen’s Facebook page in order to boost his popularity on

²⁶ ‘Joint Statement: ADHOC, CCHR, CCIM, CLEC, STT and LICADHO condemn violence against MPs’, 27 October 2015.

²⁷ Meas Sokchea, Chhay Channyda and Charles Parkinson, “‘World watching’ inquiry”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 28 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/2e3Vwtd>.

²⁸ Shaun Turton and Chhay Channyda, ‘Sokha stripped of National Assembly vice presidency’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 30 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/2edwlmh>.

²⁹ Phak Seangly and Shaun Turton, ‘Arrest warrant issued for Rainsy’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 13 November 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dKXmKp>.

³⁰ Vong Sokheng, ‘PM launches personal attack on Rainsy’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 13 November 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dxbRnb>.

³¹ Joe Freeman, ‘A life in opposition’ (Book Review), *Asia Times Online*, 26 July 2013, <http://bit.ly/2egk9Py>.

³² Chhay Channyda and Taing Vida, ‘Rainsy stripped of lawmaker status’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 16 November 2015, <http://bit.ly/2eMf7wZ>.

³³ Phak Seangly and Stuart White, ‘Fresh summons for Rainsy’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 21 November 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dxcey5>.

³⁴ Vuthy Tha, Pagnawath Khun and Joshua Lipes, ‘Cambodian Court Summons Sam Rainsy in New Defamation Case’, *Radio Free Asia*, 2 December 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dKWjKn>.

the social media platform.³⁵ On 8 November 2016, he was convicted in the case and ordered to pay a \$2,500 fine and \$3,750 in compensation.³⁶

Before that however, he had already been convicted of the defamation charges filed by Heng Samrin on 28 July 2016 and fined a staggering \$37,500 to pay in compensation to the latter.³⁷ On 1 August 2016, Hun Sen had also filed a defamation suit against Sam Rainsy – as well as against SRP Senator Thak Lany, who was convicted in mid-November 2016³⁸ – over the latter’s comments that the government was behind the 10 July 2016 murder of political analyst Kem Ley.³⁹ Authorities have charged a former soldier by the name of Oeuth Ang with the premeditated murder of Kem Ley, who had been an outspoken critic of the government, and have said that the murder was a result of a \$3,000 owed by Kem Ley; this official version of events, however, has been harshly criticized by many.⁴⁰ And as 2016 came to close, on 27 December, Sam Rainsy – along with two of his Facebook administrators – was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison in relation to the Facebook post of Hong Sok Hour’s video mentioned above.⁴¹

Meanwhile, CNRP Vice-President Kem Sokha has also come under renewed attacks throughout 2016, starting with the release of audio recordings in early March that allegedly featured Kem Sokha speaking with an alleged mistress.⁴² The woman’s voice was identified early on as Khem Chandaraty, a hair salon worker, who initially denied she had ever had an affair with Kem Sokha and had sought assistance from ADHOC staff.⁴³ However, on 20 April, Khem Chandaraty changed her story and admitted to being Kem Sokha’s mistress,⁴⁴ and several days later, turned on her lawyers and accused them of having bribed her to deny the affair.⁴⁵ By 2 May, four ADHOC staff, former ADHOC staff and current NEC Deputy Secretary General Ny Chakrya, and a UN OHCHR staff were charged and, by the next day,

³⁵ Kuch Naren, ‘Sam Rainsy Summoned to Court Over Facebook Lawsuit’, *The Cambodia Daily*, 19 March 2016, <http://bit.ly/2ePxvVu>.

³⁶ Vuthy Huot, ‘Cambodian Court Finds Opposition Leader Guilty of Defamation’, *Radio Free Asia*, 8 November 2016, <http://bit.ly/2j2qHpo>.

³⁷ Niem Chhen and Ananth Baliga, ‘Sam Rainsy hit with guilty verdict for Samrin defamation suit’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 29 July 2016, <http://bit.ly/2ibdIga>.

³⁸ Niem Chhen and Shaun Turton, ‘Senator sentenced to 18 months for linking PM to Ley murder’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 18 November 2016, <http://bit.ly/2iYDadh>.

³⁹ Chandara Yang and Tha Thai, ‘Murder Accusations Cause Cambodia’s Hun Sen to Seek Redress in Court’, *Radio Free Asia*, 1 August 2016, <http://bit.ly/2egj2A2>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Lay Samean and Erin Handley, ‘Rainsy, 2 others get five years’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 28 December 2016, <http://bit.ly/2iyYVxd>.

⁴² Bun Sengkong, ‘Recordings hint at CNRP deputy leader Sokha’s infidelity’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 2 March 2016, <http://bit.ly/2eW008I>.

⁴³ Niem Chheng, ‘Mom Srey’ denies Sokha affair’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 10 March 2016, <http://bit.ly/2fjaEmj>.

⁴⁴ Lay Samean, ‘Sokha’s alleged mistress ‘changes her story’ in court appearance’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 20 April 2016, <http://bit.ly/2dSiTov>.

⁴⁵ Lay Samean and Shaun Turton, ‘Alleged mistress files complaints against Sokha, Adhoc’, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 25 April 2016, <http://bit.ly/2e0ehI1>.

sent to Prey Sar prison (with the exception of the OHCHR staffer, whom the UN claims has immunity from prosecution).⁴⁶

In early September, Kem Sokha was sentenced in absentia to five months in prison for failing to appear in court.⁴⁷ Until early December 2016, he stayed inside the CNRP headquarters, save for a couple of hours in October to register for the elections, fearing arrest and violence.⁴⁸ Although a November Appeal Court decision rejected an appeal by Kem Sokha's lawyer to overturn the conviction,⁴⁹ he was granted a Royal Pardon – at the request of Hun Sen – on 2 December 2016, which cleared him of the charges of failing to appear in court.⁵⁰

Finally, the most recent case is that of CNRP lawmaker Um Sam An, who was sentenced to two and a half years in prison on 10 October 2016, in relation to Facebook posts he made criticizing the government for allegedly ceding territory to Vietnam by using incorrect border demarcation maps.⁵¹ Sam An had been charged in April 2016, despite the posts having been made the previous year, raising further concerns that the case was pursued for political aims.

On 12 October 2016, the Council of Ministers issued a directive banning all airlines from selling tickets to Sam Rainsy – who has not returned to Cambodia since the first charges were brought in November 2015 – to return to Cambodia, and warned that planes carrying him could be turned around; it further banned Sam Rainsy from entering the country through other means, including by forbidding immigration officers from letting him through.⁵²

IV. Political Strategies

To many observers, Cambodian politics – and the strategies employed by the main political parties – are often nonsensical and contradictory to their objectives. While there is some truth to that perception, the tactics employed by the parties are in fact, in most cases, thought-out and deliberate. The following section provides a brief overview of the strategies employed by the two main political parties: the CPP and The CNRP.

The Cambodian People's Party

⁴⁶ Lay Samean and Ananth Baliga, 'Rights workers, two others 'bribed witness', court says; UN holds firm', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 3 May 2016, <http://bit.ly/2f57ZJe>.

⁴⁷ Brooks Boliek, 'Cambodian Court Sentences Opposition Leader Kem Sokha to Five Months in Jail', *Radio Free Asia*, 9 September 2016, <http://bit.ly/2dSIJtq>.

⁴⁸ Mech Dara and Alex Willemyns, 'Sokha leaves CNRP HQ to register, raising hopes of thaw', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 6 October 2016, <http://bit.ly/2f1LmWb>.

⁴⁹ Niem Chheng, 'Kem Sokha appeal of jail sentence falls flat', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 7 November 2016, <http://bit.ly/2fvYnGt>.

⁵⁰ Mech Dara, 'Breaking: Royal pardon for Kem Sokha', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 2 December 2016, <http://bit.ly/2jo5pyW>.

⁵¹ Niem Chheng, 'Sam An sentenced to jail', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 11 October 2016, <http://bit.ly/2eigVi4>.

⁵² Touch Sokha, 'It's real exile now, says Rainsy', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 24 October 2016, <http://bit.ly/2dBIXiD>.

The 2013 elections were a game-changer. Despite alleged election irregularities and an uneven campaign playing field,⁵³ the CNRP mounted a serious challenge against the CPP – first at the polling stations and then on the streets of Phnom Penh. The CPP cannot afford to be so blasé again. Yet, since 2013, the CPP seems to have struggled to devise a coherent and consistent strategy to navigate its way through the various factors, challenges, threats and seismic shifts that have defined Cambodian politics since the 2013 elections.

Initially, immediately following the 2013 elections, the CPP's strategy was to attempt to re-establish control by undermining the CNRP and forcing the protestors off the streets of Phnom Penh as quickly as possible, while using as little force and spilling as little blood as possible. After reasserting full control in January 2014, the CPP could then afford to enter into talks with a drastically weakened and diminished opposition. This move not only improved the CPP's image in the eyes of the people following the January 2014 shootings, but also served to neutralize the opposition still further. This was short-lived however, and by mid-2015 the ruling party returned to its old tricks. Rather than continue down the more progressive path charted in 2014, the CPP has re-asserted its authority and reverted to tried and trusted tactics.

However, the CPP's strategy to weaken the opposition through the courts has been accompanied by other tactics similarly aimed at undermining their influence countrywide. For instance, the CPP is welcoming new political parties that can divide, challenge or neutralize the CNRP.⁵⁴ Even purely independent parties are a welcome presence on the political scene, as far as the CPP is concerned.⁵⁵ It is also working to attract the Cambodian diaspora – particularly in the United States, France and Australia.

The CPP is also trying to rally votes by actually making an effort to solve some of the country's most urgent issues; some of the reforms that have been undertaken over the past few years are based on real policy decisions. In the same vein, the CPP has increasingly been focusing efforts to attract the support of the youth, which was the CNRP's core support base in 2013. Hun Sen himself has recently turned to Facebook,⁵⁶ which he increasingly uses to present a friendlier, "normal guy" image to the public, and has supported his youngest son, Hun Many, as the face of the new CPP. For more than two years, Hun Many – head of the CPP-aligned Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia – has been engaging with Facebook

⁵³ The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL), 'Democracy, Elections and Reform in Cambodia' (2013 Annual Report), Phnom Penh, April 2014, pp.18-22, <http://bit.ly/2e1To2Z>.

⁵⁴ Aun Pheap, 'Former CPP Lawmaker Announces Plans to Form New Party', *The Cambodia Daily*, 26 November 2015, <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/former-cpp-lawmaker-announces-plans-to-form-new-party-101299/>.

⁵⁵ David Hutt, 'Gang of four: Cambodia's new political parties', *Southeast Asia Globe*, 1 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dC8NGj>.

⁵⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/hun.sencambodia/?fref=ts>.

groups and youth groups, to try to present the CPP message in a sympathetic light and to listen to the concerns and ideas of such groups.⁵⁷

At the same time, the CPP has slowly been building its support from China over the years, who now spends millions each year in direct aid to the government. During an October 2016 visit to Cambodia by the Chinese premier Xi Jinping, some 31 agreements between the two countries were signed, including a deal to erase almost \$90 million in debt and a \$15 million military aid package.⁵⁸ And as China's economic and political support to Cambodia grows, the need to appease foreign donors through reforms is less and less important.

The CPP must understand that times have changed with the 2013 elections. It must admit that there is a democratic youth movement, inexorably gathering strength, that sooner or late will demand and achieve change. By continuing down its current path of "old politics", the CPP risks further distancing itself from the demands, wishes and vision of the people.

The Cambodia National Rescue Party

Sam Rainsy, under the banner of the SRP, has always used populist rhetoric to galvanize its grassroots support. Similarly, Kem Sokha's rise in popularity was also heavily due to comments related to Vietnam. Soon after the merger between the SRP and the HRP, the new party continued along the path the SRP had set out, and party leaders continued to stir up historical animosity towards Vietnam and the ethnic Vietnamese population in Cambodia as one of its main tactics.⁵⁹ In doing so, the CNRP is pandering to political, historical, emotional and psychological scars and complexes. Its leaders continually try to undermine the CPP using regressive, politically explosive and racist rhetoric.⁶⁰ They repeatedly emphasize CPP links both with the despotic Khmer Rouge regime of the 1970s and with Vietnam.⁶¹

As despicable as it may be, however, the CNRP's anti-Vietnamese rhetoric has proven to be incredibly successful with many of its supporters. Yet it is not without risks. Over and over again, Vietnamese people and businesses – or sometimes even those simply suspected of being Vietnamese – are targeted during protests. During the early January 2014 protests on Veng Sreng Boulevard, observers and journalists noted that the protestors were shouting racial epithets as they looted and destroyed Vietnamese-owned businesses along the street.⁶²

⁵⁷ Kevin Ponniah, 'Hun Many opens up to criticism', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 11 June 2014, <http://bit.ly/2eC4wCi>.

⁵⁸ Sopheng Cheang/AP, 'China forgives \$90 million debt owned by Cambodia', *The Washington Post*, 13 October 2016, <http://wapo.st/2f7wdTA>.

⁵⁹ Kevin Ponniah, 'Anti-Vietnam talk by CNRP "alarms" envoy', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 17 January 2014, <http://bit.ly/2emTHmx>.

⁶⁰ Peter Tan Keo, 'Violence begets violence in Cambodia', *Asia Times Online*, 17 January 2014, <http://bit.ly/2emc6Eo>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Julia Wallace and Neou Vannarin, 'Cambodia protests unmask anti-Vietnam views', *Al Jazeera*, 24 January 2014, <http://bit.ly/2ePbger>.

The CNRP's other principal strategy appears to be to recreate 2013, only bigger and better. Furthermore, Sam Rainsy is naively banking on Hun Sen repeating his moves from 2013 in initiating a royal pardon. Given the way that the 2013 elections then played out, it would be a surprise if Hun Sen were to tread the same dubious path.

In a country where an ever-increasing percentage of the population has access to the Internet and is linked through social media networks, the use of these tools to galvanize support is increasingly important, and the CNRP has, from the start, and to this day, capitalized on that. Starting with the mass protests in 2013 and 2014, CNRP leaders used social media to mobilize their support base and to engage the new crop of Cambodian voters: the youth.

Moreover, since the 2013 national elections, the CNRP has resorted to boycotting the National Assembly several times – at times due to legitimate security concerns. In practice however, boycotting the National Assembly has achieved very little: with their absolute parliamentary majority, CPP National Assembly representatives are able to push through any legislation that they want.⁶³ It is, however, quite understandable that CNRP National Assembly representatives have been unwilling to attend parliamentary sessions given the violence that was meted out to the two CNRP National Assembly members, Nhay Chamroeun and Kong Saphea.⁶⁴

Finally, faced with occasional criticism over their lack of substantive policy, the CNRP has, over the past several years, made some attempts to develop more concrete policy solutions to Cambodia's problems and to position themselves as a viable governing alternative to the CPP. In early August 2016, the CNRP announced it was in the process of creating a "shadow cabinet" of lawmakers that would serve as alternative government ministers, an announcement which came in the heels of the release of a draft 67-page manifesto in response to criticism over the party's lack of substantive policies.⁶⁵ While these moves are a welcome development, it remains to be seen whether this will result in concrete changes in how the party behaves.

Meanwhile, the CNRP continues to capitalize on the support it receives from the Cambodian Diaspora – particularly that in the United States and Australia – who provide much of the party's funds. The CNRP spends significant time and energy in catering to the demands of the Diaspora to keep this funding alive, which partly explains the CNRP's obsession with Vietnam and the border issues – issues which are important to the Diaspora. The CNRP also benefits from strong support from the international community – although the extent to which that support translates into political leverage on the ground is debatable. Sam Rainsy and

⁶³ Vong Sokheng and Charles Rollet, 'Assembly passes budget as CNRP boycotts vote', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 1 December 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dpwfZb>.

⁶⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIqa5Mad7Sc>.

⁶⁵ Alex Willemyns and Sek Odom, 'Opposition Unveils Plans for Shadow Cabinet', *The Cambodia Daily*, 10 August 2016, <http://bit.ly/2eWcsxk>.

other CNRP leaders have spent considerable time and energy over the years in touring Western capitals and pleading their case to foreign governments, who in turn issue, at times, strongly worded statements condemning the CPP's targeting of the opposition.

The CNRP has a lot of ground to make up to start competing with the CPP on policy ground and presenting itself as a viable government-in-waiting. Indeed, the CNRP has disappointed many of its followers since the surge of hope and expectation in 2013, which risks dashing the hopes of the people and the youth while alienating its support base, especially in light of the new political parties, such as the Grassroots Democracy Party and the Beehive Social Democratic Party, that have sprung up during the course of 2015.⁶⁶

V. Risks

In abandoning the Culture of Dialogue, both leaders have turned back the clock, playing parts that they have played for years, which is not doing Cambodian democracy any favors. Furthermore, the political elite is increasingly out of touch with the electorate, while serious policy debate is being neglected. Yet more and more Cambodians risk feeling marginalized if politicians continue to avoid serious policy discussions about critical issues.

The Cambodian youth, who mobilized in 2013, armed with smartphones and innovative social media apps, still want more policy debate and political accountability. Unless risks are acknowledged, strategies recalibrated, and policy platforms established, the groundswell of public opinion— particularly among urban dwellers and the youth – could very likely mean another wave of protests, political upheaval and violence around the 2018 elections.

The risks of a continuation of the status quo are manifold. The more disenfranchised and marginalized people feel, the more likely there are to be mass protests or general strikes, as frustration and anger well up again. Following the 2013 elections, people expect their voices to be heard, their views to be taken into account. While a blanket of fear has shrouded the country yet again, it is now becoming increasingly difficult to go back. People had a taste of freedom, and if people feel that they have been unfairly deprived of political representation – or that their representatives are not willing to act on their behalf – there is a significant risk that anger will bubble up again in the absence of hope.

Almost inevitably, anger leads to violence, especially in a country like Cambodia, where the authorities have proven themselves willing to use force, both officially by security forces and unofficially.. Another risk is that the public and any protestors resort to violence. That is precisely why it is in the interests of the government not to keep the lid on the situation for too long, as pressure will eventually build to a dangerous level. People need the hope of free and fair elections, of political parties who represent them and their interests, and the overall democratic process.

⁶⁶ David Hutt, 'Gang of four: Cambodia's new political parties', *Southeast Asia Globe*, 1 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/2dC8NGj>.

Politics in Cambodia is still very fragile. That is why the right, balanced approach would be to build confidence, not only among politicians on both sides, but especially with the people. In addition, the longer that people can taste freedom in cyberspace – both receiving more information and opinions from their peers and expressing their own – the more unimaginable it would seem to turn back the tide. The risks of doing so are increasing all the time.

VI. Conclusion

The Cambodian youth who so fearlessly took to the streets in 2013 are still out there, somewhere. Their voices are increasingly heard on social media. Already by the 2013 elections, the Cambodian youth was becoming more and more engaged and informed regarding political issues, facilitated by the rise in use of social media and smartphones.

But before the next elections in 2018 – and indeed the commune elections in 2017 – Cambodia needs these young people to start vociferously demanding accountability and policy solutions from their political leaders,. Otherwise Cambodia will never move on from the past. If their leaders fail to respond, and continue to favor the old, negative politics of these past few months, then the Cambodian youth needs to inject fresh blood into the two main political parties, as well as the plethora of smaller political parties that have sprung up recently. It is high time for them to step out of the shadows, conquer their fear, challenge their leaders and push Cambodia into a new era of democracy.

But democracy is not just about elections. It is also about respect for the rule of law; respect for fundamental rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association; a strong and vibrant civil society; a genuine separation of the powers of the three branches of government; transparency and accountability; and economic development to be shared by all. The pattern of political gamesmanship in Cambodia is an obstacle to devising concrete policy solutions to Cambodia's most pressing problems.

Yet there are many reasons to be optimistic. The new, younger, politically conscious generation can bring new, fresh ideas and perspectives to the table, and help the older generations to establish a positive vision for the country based on policy discussion and solutions. If both parties can embrace this new era of politics, shift politics away from personalities and fear towards policies and values, and institutionalize themselves around people, ideas and structures, then Cambodia can finally begin to fulfill its potential. The 2018 elections will be the test for such reforms and progress.