



Cambodia Not Ready For Elections by Peter Brookes

A few weeks ago, almost a year to the day after he deposed First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh in a violent coup d'etat, Cambodian strongman (and Second Prime Minister) Hun Sen said that he did not plan to actively participate in the upcoming election campaign boasting that none of the other candidates can beat him. What would lead Hun Sen to suggest this? Many would contend that Hun Sen is acutely aware that the environment of fear and intimidation the he has created in Cambodia since last July's coup – and the international community has permitted – will ensure his victory in the July 26th national elections.

The upcoming elections will not be free, fair or fully-representative of the Cambodian people and the U.S. should have insisted upon a delay. The Clinton Administration decided not to press for this and has left Cambodia and the world community in the unenviable position of having to deal with an election which will not be credible – plus a whole host of possibly negative consequences including further violence.

These elections are incredibly important to the future of Cambodia and their significance cannot be understated-especially in light of last July's events. It is true that elections will not cure all of Cambodia's political ills but democratic elections may propel Cambodia in the right direction and away from the dark days of the recent past. The people of Cambodia deserve better than dictatorship and despotism and the international community, led by the United States, must take steps to assist in bringing this about.

There are several obstacles that must be addressed before the elections can go forward. The opposition parties must be given more time to rebuild their infrastructure which was decimated by Hun Sen and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in the aftermath of the coup d'etat last July. Opposition leaders and activists are aware that to be politically active is to invite retribution – even death. The uninvestigated extrajudicial killings last year and recent disappearances have created a climate of fear, stifled dissent, and made intimidation prevalent among voters and party activists. An independent judiciary must be formed to protect the Constitution and investigate human rights abuses such as last year's Easter Sunday grenade attack.

The opposition parties' lack of access to the broadcast media is troublesome. Unfettered access to the media is a sine qua non of free and fair elections and opposition parties, numbering some 39, have been allowed only 5 minutes each per day on national television and radio during the campaign period which began June 25th. All other stations have been barred from airing political advertisements. This of course does not apply to Hun Sen's CPP. Further, political rallies have been banned by the government in another attempt to

limit freedom of expression. It is no wonder that Hun Sen feels he does not have to campaign.

Of special significance is the shortage of international election monitors – especially long-term monitors. Election observers could be crucial in the actual situation, as they were in the earlier vote in 1993. Now, only a handful of international observers are currently present in Cambodia and only 500 international observers are expected to observe voting at over 11,000 polling stations and 1,600 counting centers. Thousands of other Cambodian observers are alleged to have close ties to the CPP. This makes fraud and intimidation uncheckable and probably inevitable.

A truce must be concluded between warring military factions of Hun Sen and Prince Ranariddh. A failure to do this before the elections only increases the likelihood that violence will be part of Cambodia's future. The military must also be de-politicized, unified into a single force and returned to the barracks.

The Constitutional Council, the country's highest appeals body, which is mandated to adjudicate electoral disputes and ultimately to rule on the legitimacy of the election has not been able form itself as a body worthy of its importance and responsibility.

There is also the problem of registration for the over 70,000 Cambodian refugees residing in Thailand and numerous overseas Cambodians. Currently, they have not been authorized by the Cambodian government to register and participate in the elections. The overseas Cambodians, many of them Americans, make up as much as 5% of the eligible population and perhaps bring the strongest convictions about freedom and democracy to the political scene. They should be allowed to participate.

The current political environment is in no way conducive to the democratic process and free and fair elections are not possible. The international community, led by the United States, failed to act and should have called for a postponement in the elections. A window of opportunity to push for free and fair elections is quickly closing and the current government must be made aware that the U.N. seat, accession into ASEAN, and international aid will be predicated on free, fair – and credible – elections.

No one disputes that Cambodia should hold elections sometime this year but the Clinton Administration has decided to go forward with a deeply flawed and hurried electoral process. This scenario will not help to establish democracy or increase the likelihood of bringing an end to violence in Cambodia. The United States should not support non-credible elections and certainly should not aid illegitimate or fraudulent elections – which may soon prove to be the case.

Democracy and freedom are possible in Cambodia and it was incumbent upon the United States and the international community to do the right thing and push for a delay in the polls until such a time when elections have a reasonable chance to be free, fair and fully-representative of the Cambodian people.

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