



Grim political climate, dictatorship rubber-stampers take over Cambodian Elections

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As legislative elections will take place in Cambodia on July 29, ANFREL will not deploy observers in the country, since we believe the repressive political environment prejudicial to a truly democratic electoral process. In doing so, we stand in solidarity with our members NICFEC and COMFREL, as well as other Cambodian civil society groups who felt compelled to decline monitoring these polls.

The upcoming Cambodian elections fail to meet international civil and political rights standards and norms that the country has recognized, and as such cannot be considered free and fair. Over the past year, the Cambodian Government and National Election Commission (NEC), both dominated by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), have been instrumental in stunting the development of a competitive electoral process, thus effectively eradicating multiparty democracy in the country.

With the absence of the main opposition party, many Cambodians feel dispossessed of their choice and will not cast a ballot on Sunday. The vibrant electoral campaigns and voter mobilization witnessed in last year's commune elections have given way to subdued behavior and a widespread sense of resignation among the population.

ANFREL recently conducted a Pre-Election Assessment Mission, in which observers witnessed firsthand the grim condition of democracy in Cambodia. Mission members met with stakeholders who described a country where civil and political rights are disregarded, media freedoms are stifled, impunity prevails, intimidation is rampant, and the playing field is tipped to favor the ruling party.

Facing sustained pressure from the international community, the Cambodian People's Party is trying to mobilize voters in an attempt to control the narrative and establish its legitimacy. Reported instances of harassment to get voters to the polls are skyrocketing, while article 142 of the electoral law is used broadly to silence those expressing their intent to abstain, even though voting is not compulsory in Cambodia.

Across the country, reports of threats made by government and party officials are commonplace, mentioning loss of privileges or monetary incentives for voters if they do not have ink on their fingers after election day. The level of trust in the electoral process should not be deducted solely from voter turnout rate published by the NEC, but also from the number of invalid ballots, which include both blank and spoiled ballots.



With the absence of non-partisan election observers, distrust of the electoral system has prevailed, prompting the government to create a veneer of checks and balances through the deployment of biased election observers. Of the nearly 80,000 accredited domestic observers, more than half hail from two groups, the Union of Youth Federation of Cambodia (UYFC) and the Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD). Both have close ties to the ruling party, as the first is headed by Hun Many, one of the Prime Minister's sons, and the second by Deputy Prime Minister Men Sam An. The rest of the observers come from smaller organisations less recognizable but just as questionable as to their motivations and methodology.

Similarly, international groups notorious for rubber-stamping elections will also be present to witness, and presumably endorse, the election process. It is our informed opinion that of all the organizations accredited by the NEC to deploy observers, none display the independence nor the skills required to conduct proper election monitoring. Without the presence of trained, experienced observers using methodology-based reporting, the information that these groups will release during and after the elections will not be reliable or trustworthy, and will only serve to reinforce the CPP's narrative.

Space for independent coverage of the elections has also been restricted after one English-language newspaper was shut down, another saw a drastic change in its editorial line, and many radio stations were forcibly closed. This repression of independent news outlets is accompanied by increased scrutiny from government monitors of social media, the last remaining stronghold of free speech in the country.

ANFREL reiterates that merely going through the exercise of casting and counting ballots does not constitute a free and fair election. This charade of an organised election being touted by the Cambodian Government and the NEC should not be assessed in isolation to the grim injustices which characterize the electoral climate in the country. As a monitoring organisation, we consider electoral participation, in any capacity, as the distillation of every person's fundamental civil and political rights. Setting hurdles, deprivation of the opportunity to participate, as well as the use of threats and force to influence the will of voters, are forms of grave human rights violation and have no place in any genuine democratic process.

Given the context in the country, truly democratic elections in Cambodia simply will not happen.

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