



The 2018 Cambodian Elections: Nothing but a Charade

For immediate release

Bangkok, Thailand

August 2, 2018

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), after careful assessment, has determined that the conduct of the 2018 Cambodian Elections was anything but free or fair. Having observed more than 50 elections over the past two decades, ANFREL believes that this one was more bereft of truly democratic political processes than almost any other election it has witnessed.

Genuinely free and fair elections are combinations of an organized, transparent polling process and an open political environment respectful of fundamental civil and political rights. When conducted properly, elections allow citizens to hold elected officials accountable for their actions. However, accountability is undermined when the playing field is tilted in a way that the governing party is so dominant that voters are left with no credible alternatives to support.

Marred by reports of widespread intimidation, fear and harassment, as well as offers of favors and monetary incentives to voters by the ruling party, these elections afforded no opportunity for Cambodians to participate in vibrant political discussions or intense campaigning. Instead, the palpable feeling of resignation translated into more than 9 percent of ballots being invalidated, about six times the number invalidated in the last national election.

Truly democratic elections rely on the free exercise by citizens of their freedoms of expression, assembly and association, but such freedoms were methodically undermined in Cambodia starting well in advance of polling day. Strict restrictions imposed on political discussions in the public domain engendered a culture of censorship that tightly curtailed freedom of speech. Such restrictions began with the crackdown on independent media in 2017 which even then was perceived as intended to stifle independent, critical voices and control the narrative presented to ordinary citizens. The absence of independent voices in the media is responsible, at least in part, for a lopsided outcome and is an additional reason to call into question the victory of the winning party.

As the only true source of governmental legitimacy, genuinely free elections are feared by authoritarian regimes like that of Hun Sen, which is why they prefer staged elections devoid of an inclusive, humane electoral environment. Potemkin elections like the one that occurred in Cambodia last Sunday only provide a facade to cover up a rotting, dying democracy.

Unfortunately, during the past year, the world stood by idly as the government, which has ruled for over three decades, acted to eradicate all forms of dissent, clamped down on independent media and civil society, and incarcerated critics and members of the opposition.



The National Election Committee boasted of a high voter turnout of 82%, or 6.89 million voters out of 8.38 million registered voters. However, these numbers must be appreciated in the context in which the elections were held, which included threats to charge non-voters with treason and a high level of intentionally spoiled ballots. Moreover, the NEC is in no way empowered to act independently of the government and is a seriously flawed institution.

Pro-government “observers” invited by the Cambodian government to monitor the polling claimed that Cambodia “has nothing to hide” and touted a “vibrant” electoral environment, where “people dance on the streets” and “the will of the voters were expressed”. Such blatant misrepresentations of the actual electoral climate intentionally overlooked the repression experienced by human rights and democracy advocates, media, and ordinary citizens, not to mention the real opposition which was systematically outlawed and dismantled by Hun Sen’s regime. These pro-government observers lacked credibility, citing only stakeholders aligned with the ruling party with whom they were allowed to interact during their carefully curated tour of Cambodian polling stations.

ANFREL reiterates its finding from its Pre-election Assessment Mission report that the election environment was far from democratic. The elections held in Cambodia last Sunday cannot be considered a success by any yardstick of democracy. Neither Khmer voters nor political rights advocates were heard, and thoughtful people around the world have already dismissed the results as illegitimate, therefore calling into question the legitimacy of the ruling party.

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