

Cambodian government expels opposition party from parliament

By John Roberts
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The Cambodian Constitutional Council last Tuesday endorsed changes to four anti-democratic election laws approved earlier by the National Assembly and Senate. The changed laws pave the way for the expulsion from the parliament of all members of the main opposition party elected in 2013, plus thousands of its members elected to regional governments last June.

The measures will effectively wipe out the results of both elections and give the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) unchallengeable control of every level of government. The CPP is only waiting for a Supreme Court ruling, due by the end of month, to dissolve the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP).

The CNRP won about 44 percent of the vote in 2013, giving it 55 parliamentary seats in the 123-member Assembly chamber. Prime Minister Hun Sen's government plans to distribute these seats to minor parties whose total vote was just 7 percent.

The royalist FUNCINPEC party, an occasional CPP ally, will be handed 41 of these seats. This cynical manoeuvre by Hun Sen seeks to provide the veneer of a "multi-party" parliamentary democracy.

In the expulsion of CNRP representatives from commune councils, there is no attempt to disguise the naked power grab.

After the June commune election results, the CPP feared it could lose the scheduled July 2018 national election. The CNRP vote increased by more than 13 percent, whereas that of the CPP fell by nearly 11 percent.

The CPP will totally reverse the commune election results, taking over the posts of 489 commune chiefs and 5,007 commune councillors won by the CNRP.

Deep social tensions lie behind these measures. Feeding into this situation are the sharp geo-political pressures throughout the South East Asian region

generated by Washington's ongoing diplomatic and military challenges to Beijing's influence.

Though the CPP has sought to improve ties with the US, it has a pro-Beijing orientation and has championed China's interests within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Like the CPP, the CNRP supports anti-working class, pro-market policies and the transformation of the country into a cheap labour platform, but is much more closely oriented toward Washington.

The crackdown on the CNRP began early last month when opposition leader Kem Sokha was arrested on treason charges. Since then, more than half of the 55 CNRP National Assembly members have fled the country, including deputy leader Mu Sochua. The rest are boycotting the parliamentary sessions.

Legislative changes this year include a provision to allow the government to suspend the activities of, or use legal proceedings to dissolve, any political party engaging in activities that may harm "national unity." Non-government organisations and foreign entities are targeted, as is their collaboration with Cambodian political parties.

The regime has used these provisions to force the US-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI), which worked with the CNRP, to end operations in the country. It also has closed down media outlets connected to programs from Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, both set up to promote US foreign policy and propaganda.

Hun Sen's regime formally moved to have the Supreme Court dissolve the CNRP on October 6. On October 10, the court gave the jailed Kem Sokha just 20 days to gather evidence to defend the CNRP against dissolution.

Interior Ministry spokesman Khieu Sopheak said the

government had received “21 pieces of concrete evidence to prove the party has intentionally sought to topple the government through a ‘colour revolution’.” Like the allegations against Sokha, these claims have not been substantiated.

A government propaganda video, broadcast last Monday on multiple TV stations, linked the opposition to US regime-change “colour” operations in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Footage included shots from Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Serbia and Ukraine.

The official US response has been muted. US Republican Senator Ted Cruz declared last Tuesday he would work with the US Congress and the Trump administration to ban some Cambodian government officials from travelling to the US, unless Kem Sokha was freed by November 9.

In a bid to shore up support for the government, Hun Sen has sought to stoke nationalist sentiment. Addressing 20,000 garment workers earlier this month, he accused the US and its allies of meddling in Cambodia’s affairs. These countries “always invade countries that are weak,” he said. “Unlike them, I have no weapons of mass destruction. So I urge you to stand up to protect peace and for the sake of future development.”

In 2013, the parliamentary opposition exploited the discontent over poverty among factory workers, many of whom financially support their families in rural areas. In 2013 and 2014, the regime violently suppressed wage struggles among the 700,000 garment and footwear workers.

On October 10, Hun Sen announced, following earlier concessions on wages and health care, that from January the lowest income tax rate of 5 percent will apply to earnings above \$US300 a month, as opposed to the current \$250. He also announced significant increases in compensation payments for public servants.

At the same time, Defence Minister Tea Banh warned that the military was prepared to deal with any opposition to the dissolution of the CNRP. “The army is ready to fight any person who wants to overthrow the legitimate government.”

Geo-political tensions are rising as US President Donald Trump threatens war with North Korea and places mounting pressure on China—militarily, diplomatically and economically. Trump is due to

travel to Asia later this week and will attend the ASEAN summit in the Philippines, where he will try to lay down the law to the region.

All 10 ASEAN governments are deeply concerned over Trump’s threat at the UN to inflict “total destruction” on North Korea—a move that could drag Asia and the world into war. As one of the ASEAN members with the closest ties with China, Cambodia could find itself in the firing line at the summit meeting.

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