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Cambodia passes law enabling dissolution of political parties

Western critics see existential threat to already weak multiparty system

NGUON SERATH, Nikkei staff writer

PHNOM PENH -- Cambodia's national assembly approved Monday a legislative amendment enabling the dissolution of any party deemed to be a threat to national security -- without a clear definition of what might constitute such a threat.

Only 66 members of the 123-seat national assembly attended the session to amend the law governing political parties, a move that directly threatens Cambodia's second-largest party, the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). All 55 CNRP members of parliament boycotted the session.

The revision also prohibits someone convicted of a crime from being president or deputy president of a political party. Opposition leader Sam Rainsy, who has lived for many years in exile to avoid arrest, recently stepped down as CNRP president.

A spokesman for the ruling Cambodian People's Party of Prime Minister Hun Sen said the amendment did not target any political party.

"The United States is deeply concerned about the amendments to Cambodia's Law on Political Parties passed by the National Assembly on Feb. 20 with little consultation or public debate," the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh said in a statement posted on its Facebook page. "The amendments give the government broad authority to restrict freedom of expression and the legitimate activities of political parties and, under vaguely defined circumstances, to dissolve them."

"The passage of these amendments marks the final consolidation of absolute power in the hands of PM Hun Sen and the ruling Cambodian People's Party," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director of U.S.-based Human Rights Watch. "The silence of foreign governments and aid donors to this

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move has been profoundly disheartening, reflecting a failure to stand up for democratic principles and human rights when facing a determined, dictatorial plan."



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