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Duncan McCargo

Local poll leaves Hun Sen looking vulnerable in 2018 election

Cambodia's ruling party needs to woo disenchanted voters to retain hold on power



Opposition CNRP youth activists at an election rally in Phnom Penh on June 2. (Photo by Duncan McCargo)

The preliminary results of Cambodia's June 4 local elections for its commune councils offer ambiguous signals for an all-important general election scheduled for July 2018.

Much depends on the choice of benchmark. In the 2012 elections for commune council chiefs, Prime Minister Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party secured overwhelming control of local government, winning 1,592 contests with more than 70% of the vote, compared with just 40 contests won by opposition parties, which secured about 30% of the vote.

By this standard, the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party's twelfold increase to 482 commune victories in 2017 is a remarkable turnaround, helped by the merger of the two opposition parties that challenged the ruling party in 2012.

But government sources have been eager to tell a different version of the story, contrasting the local elections with a shock 2013 national election in which the CNRP won 49% of the popular vote. In the 2017 commune council

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elections, the opposition vote fell back slightly to 46%, but the CPP tally remained at about 51%. A number of minor parties also competed.

Exaggerated predictions by CNRP leader Kem Sokha that the party would win 60% of the popular vote have played into CPP hands, allowing the ruling party to assert, misleadingly, that the opposition's performance was disappointing.

While the commune council results could have been much worse for the CPP, why did Hun Sen's long-ruling party -- which has effectively governed Cambodia for over 30 years -- perform so poorly? Most of the problems lie in the CPP's ham-fisted responses to the 2013 election. In most political systems, parties pay special attention to marginal or swing constituencies: when they lose in these areas, they plough effort and resources into winning voters back.

But the CPP's approach after 2013 was to punish voters for their disloyalty. Communes that supported CNRP candidates were starved of pork-barrel projects, and local CPP commune council chiefs found themselves frozen out by local party patrons and the ministers who oversaw their localities.

Punitive attitude

This punitive attitude by the CPP leadership -- seeing voters as wayward subjects who needed to be taught the error of their ways -- has largely backfired. It is reflected in the CPP's constant campaign references to Jan. 7, 1979 -- the day on which a Vietnamese invasion ended the murderous Khmer Rouge regime.

The CPP has long expected the Cambodian electorate to feel grateful to the ruling party for the subsequent restoration of order, but the average age of the population is just 24: Most Cambodians were not born until well after 1979.

Many younger Cambodians look askance at levels of entrenched corruption, the incompetence of most public sector agencies, and the lackluster performance of elected officials at all levels. For the new generation, the opposition's rhetorical question "Change or No Change?" is easily answered.

A close examination of the detailed election results will take some time, but as a general trend CPP commune council chiefs in areas that had previously voted for the CNRP were replaced with new candidates, even where the incumbent chiefs were still strongly supported by their local parties.

The CPP is a mass membership organization -- it claims to have 5 million members -- and in theory commune council candidates are selected by the local party. But in practice, district governors and their ministerial overseers are entitled to interfere with these lists, changing both their composition and the ranking of candidates.

Commune councils, with very limited power and resources -- local government controls only around 2.7% of Cambodia's national budget -- have long struggled to attract capable candidates. Many of those who run for these positions are incompetent or worse.



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The CPP claimed that it was replacing unreliable commune chiefs with younger, more effective and less corrupt candidates, but some of the replacements were political unknowns, or the cronies of local party bosses. Many of the new commune chief candidates were local business people, such as market operators, who were often distrusted by villagers.

Rather than a purge on patronage, the replacement of CPP commune chief candidates became an opportunity to refresh and even to strengthen existing patronage networks. As a result, popular (or at least familiar and well-established) commune council chiefs were dropped from candidate lists in the areas where the ruling party was most vulnerable to opposition challenges -- areas that had already been deprived of government largesse for the past four years.

The opposition CNRP will go into the 2018 election season facing some daunting issues. The popular former party leader Sam Rainsy is unable to travel to Cambodia because he is facing a two-year jail sentence in a defamation case. The government has been ramping up pressure on critical media outlets and civil society organizations in recent months.

But the latest commune council election results suggest that repressive tactics against the opposition are likely to backfire: The ruling CPP needs to get its own house in order to woo disenchanted voters. As the local election made clear, Cambodians no longer feel a debt of loyalty to the Hun Sen government for past accomplishments: young voters in particular are looking for a brighter future, and expect both major parties to put forward a new generation of more sophisticated candidates in 2018.



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