

Thursday, February 18, 2010

Cambodia's One-Party Future



Opposition party members watch Sam Rainsy speak from exile.

FEBRUARY 17, 2010

By **BRENDAN BRADY**
The Wall Street Journal
Phnom Penh

The opposition party has lost touch and Chinese patronage is threatening the prospect of multi-party democracy.

A Cambodian court on Jan. 27 sentenced the country's main opposition leader, Sam Rainsy, in absentia to two years in jail, in a closed-door trial that opposition politicians and rights groups called blatant political persecution. The eponymous Sam Rainsy Party, the largest opposition party in Cambodia, says their power will not be affected by their leader's absence. He has, after all, fled the country before when facing a similar sentence, which was eventually annulled after negotiations with the ruling Cambodian People's Party and the king.

But when and if Mr. Rainsy returns, the promise of the opposition movement appears bleaker than ever—and his leadership is partly to blame. Many civil society groups that were once moved by Mr. Rainsy's calls for transparent and democratic governance are now critical of his party's current direction: They see the party as having lost touch with its original pro-democracy platform and focusing instead on emotional nationalistic disputes with the ruling party.

"The Sam Rainsy Party has become reactionary and lost their core liberal democratic message," says Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights. "They have become quite weak, and their future is in great trouble if they keep waiting for

confrontational events to get media attention. They need to return to offering alternative policies." A survey released Feb. 2 by the International Republican Institute speaks to Mr. Virak's point. It found that Cambodians want to hear less bickering between parties and more about proposals for solutions to problems they face.

For ammunition, critics need look no further than the recent publicity stunt in which Mr. Rainsy helped villagers uproot posts demarcating Cambodia's border with Vietnam—the same act that earned his recent conviction. To score political points, the Sam Rainsy Party has revved up its criticism of Vietnam's alleged encroachment on Cambodian land, claiming that Prime Minister Hun Sen and his deputies were "letting" their more powerful neighbor do it. But relatively few Cambodians were actually affected by the demarcation of Vietnamese and Cambodian land in the isolated and scarcely populated border region; whereas thousands of Cambodians were evicted from their homes last year throughout other parts of the country.

The Sam Rainsy Party still has a popular leader in Mr. Rainsy's absence: Secretary General Mu Sochua. She is one of the few Cambodian politicians who can frequently be found walking through villages to talk to people about their problems, and her strident criticisms of the ruling party have earned her admiration in some quarters. But even she may not be able to save the party from decline.

To understand what the diminished strength of the Sam Rainsy Party means for Cambodia, it's important to understand the role the opposition party has played in the country's democratic development. Mr. Rainsy returned from to Cambodia from France in 1992, as the United Nations was beginning its peacekeeping mission in the war-torn country. Although the U.N. poured nearly \$2 billion and some 20,000 soldiers and civilian staff into the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia, it left in 1993 with only a fragile peace and political agreement in place between the country's factions.

Mr. Rainsy was at the forefront of the budding pro-democracy movement that inspired many at that time. When Mr. Rainsy started his own party in 1995, he distinguished himself from other politicians by putting democratic principles at the helm of his platform, and he claimed his movement would "mobilize millions of people" who shared the same ideals. Indeed, the Sam Rainsy Party offered a significant domestic voice fighting against graft and urging improved wages for workers and greater rights protections for all.

But now even this limited collective bulwark is breaking down—and not just because Mr. Rainsy is in exile. For the last couple of decades many of the most potent checks and balances against the ruling party have come from the leverage of Western aid donors, who attach stipulations of standards in governance and human rights to the hundreds of millions of dollars in aid money that flows into the country each year. But this equation is changing: With Beijing's patronage of Cambodia's government growing, the influence of Western countries to push for transparency and rights protections is weakening.

This was dramatically displayed last December when Beijing officials were able to lean on their counterparts in Phnom Penh to ensure a group of Uighur asylum seekers were

sent back to China. Thanks in part to this phenomenon, the ruling party has been able to solidify its dominance over opposition parties by pushing through a constitutional amendment in 2006 that reduces the electoral majority it needs to stay in power.

Cambodia is beginning to look more and more like its neighbors, which are mostly one-party states. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the country's nascent multi-party democracy was riven by intimidation and violence, but there was space for competing ideas and parties to have a voice. Today, the main opposition party finds itself repeatedly muzzled. As China's influence in Southeast Asia continues to expand, this pattern may only grow stronger.

Mr. Brady is a free-lance journalist based in Southeast Asia.