



‘The Rule of Murderers and Thieves’

A Cambodian opposition leader has little hope that his country's upcoming election will be free or fair. Why he's fighting hard anyway.

Rainsy believes the West is losing its leverage in Cambodia

Eric Pape

Cambodia was once the grand international project. Before the upheavals of Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans, the global community launched an ambitious plan to heal a ruined country through diplomacy, development and democracy. It's been an uneven road--littered with hundreds of bodies, questionable elections and billions of aid dollars.

The next milestone comes on July 27, the day Cambodians will take part in national polls to choose a prime minister for the third time since 1993, when the United Nations oversaw one of the biggest electoral projects in its history. Outside Cambodia, the world may be focusing on whether a war-crimes tribunal will finally bring some hint of justice for the 1.8 million victims of the Khmer Rouge nearly three decades after the regime fell, but inside the country voters have more pressing concerns: rising inflation, glaring corruption (including government-backed land seizures) and an ever-larger gap between the wealthy and the dirt-poor.

A dozen parties qualified to run parliamentary candidates, but two main contenders for the premiership stand out. The People's Party of incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen--a former communist and one-time low-level Khmer Rouge commander who remains an intimidating presence after more than two decades in power--holds 73 seats. The other is Sam Rainsy, a former finance minister who has long railed against corruption and was almost killed during a hit-squad attack during a 1997 protest. (A quick-moving bodyguard sacrificed his life by jumping in front of Rainsy; he was among the 13 confirmed dead.) Rainsy's party, which currently holds 24 parliamentary seats, appears likely to benefit from internal divisions in the royalist FUNCINPEC party, which currently holds 26 seats and is the junior partner in the current coalition government. But given Hun Sen's near absolute control of Cambodian television, radio, the courts and the electoral structures that validate elections, any meaningful decline in his power would amount to a stunning blow.