

Registered in British Columbia, LICADHO Canada provides critical services to communities on the front lines of the Cambodian land-grabbing crisis in meaningful collaboration with LICADHO - *Cambodian League for the Promotion & Defense of Human Rights*.

TRAIL BLAZING FOR CHANGE

July – October 2013

Pre-election campaigning was in full flight at the start of July. As usual the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) had control of the major Khmer newspapers, national television, and most radio stations but unlike previous elections, Cambodia's youth had become intimately more acquainted with Facebook, Twitter and dozens of other social media sites and this national election year saw a huge increase in the youth vote which upped the ante.

The two major opposition parties successfully joined together to become Cambodia's National Rescue Party (CNRP). CNRP captured not only the youth's attention by using social media sites, live streaming and broadcasting on independent radio stations, they made major gains in [popularity both online](#) and throughout the country using a single word Cambodians could resonate with: "[Change](#)".

ELECTIONS

After four years, Sam Rainsy (the joint leader of CNRP), who had been in self-imposed exile avoiding a steep court sentence from spurious and politically motivated charges, was pardoned by King Sihamoni and [returned to Cambodia](#) three weeks before elections to garner support for his party. He was met at the airport by hundreds of thousands of supporters.

Just prior to elections, evidence of irregularities, voter registration in excess of 100%, duplicate names, ghost names, and missing names started to surface in the media. Subsequently, days before the election it was discovered that the indelible ink to be used during elections could be washed off with soap in water causing worry that people would be able to vote several times. Each new insight continued the fatal blows to what was becoming an un-credible election. All allegations were denied by the National Election Committee (NEC) which is widely reported to be dominated by the CPP.

During July 28 election, election observers witnessed [serious irregularities](#) and biased behaviour by NEC staff. Allegedly, more than 1,000,000 voters were denied the right to vote. Despite this, and despite only a mere 300,000 vote difference between the two parties, NEC declared that CPP won the election. CNRP also claimed a win and called for an independent investigation into election irregularities, a request repeated by [America and Australia](#). NEC and CPP refused and continue to refuse an independent investigation.

POST ELECTION STAND-OFF

Immediately after election, residents in Phnom Penh saw [rocket launchers, tanks and military personnel entering the capital city](#); scaring many residents to lay low in the provincial areas. TV stations showed military forces pledging allegiance to the Prime Minister and practicing crowd control, including with live ammunition. The tension throughout Phnom Penh and the country could have been cut with a knife.

While informal youth and other groups began prayer and other actions calling for peaceful resolution, the CNRP began organising [mass demonstrations](#) at Freedom Park, the largest being three days between September 15-17, which saw daily crowds



Working Group for Peace campaigned to keep the political parties peaceful pre and post- election



Looking for names at polling stations

LICADHO monitors observed in over 100 polling stations on July 28 and produced a [report](#) outlining the serious allegations of elections fraud.



Military police in formation on the riverside tourist area near the Foreign Correspondence Club.

of tens of thousands of people. Prior to the rallies road blocks were set up around the city and on the roads entering the city to try and prevent supporters from joining. Monks and NGOs were sent intimidating messages from relevant government officials not to join the rallies. Despite the intimidation and militarization of Phnom Penh, people power roared forward.

THE CAMBODIAN SPRING BEGINS

[September 15-17](#) saw tens of thousands of people from across the country in 'Freedom Park' demanding an independent election investigation. The three days of sharing, singing, and praying were marred by violence on the 15th. During the [day](#), a small crowd faced off with police at the riverside when trying to get past barricades, many trying to access their homes. Authorities fired smoke bombs and water hoses at the crowd, pinning one man under the wire and filling his lungs with water.

That evening, after hours at another roadblock, demonstrators and residents who were also unable to return to their homes started to remove the barricades. Police responded with smoke bombs and live fire, [killing one person and injuring nine others](#). The government continues to refuse an investigation into the police violence or to admit that there was any wrongdoing.

Despite CNRP supporters' non-violent stance, they [continue to be met with violence](#). On September 20, [Prince Thomico](#), while on a hunger strike at Wat Phnom with a small group of monks and supporters, was aggressively dispersed by authorities late at night after electricity was cut at the Wat. Two days later, a small group of mainly women from Boeung Kak held their own hunger strike at Wat Phnom. Electricity was again cut at Wat Phnom after 10pm and as the women, their supporters, human rights observers, and media were preparing to leave, a group of masked thugs alongside military police launched a [violent attack](#) on all. Ten community members, one human rights observer and a [several journalists were injured](#); four of the community representatives had to be hospitalized.

A ONE-PARTY STATE

On [September 23](#) the CPP went forward as a [one-party state](#) when they chose to start the new National Assembly without the participation of the opposition. The CNRP claim they will continue to boycott the Assembly until an independent investigation is launched. The CPP seem to see no problem in carrying on as a one-party state.

As the stand-off continues and Cambodia's future remains uncertain, one thing is for sure: Cambodians are ready for change and the self-acclaimed Strong Man Hun Sen is a strong man no more. Whether he concedes now or loses next election, he's already lost the support and trust of his people as clearly revealed in CPP's own election results.

UN Special Rapporteur Surya Subedi had this to say about Cambodia's current situation:

"The wise will move with time and accept change. Those who do not heed the call would do so at their own peril since change will be thrust upon them. Leadership is about managing change through reform rather than resisting it. I am of the view that those who are on the wrong side of history will be punished by history."



Actions calling for peaceful solution meet blocks

"Cambodian Tweets Lead the News" [Asian Beat Blog](#), [The Diplomat](#)



Thugs shot marbles from slingshots at community reps, journalists and human rights observers.



Soldier accepts lotus peace symbol from peace activist