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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By John Roberts

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Cambodia's autocratic regime desperately tries to legitimise its rule

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen last week called a “Consultation Forum” in Phnom Penh’s Peace Palace to involve 20 political parties that failed to gain seats in the July 29 national elections in a new “culture of dialogue.”

The presidents of the 16 parties that showed up were offered positions as advisers to the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) government, which won all 125 seats in the new National Assembly. This rigged election came after the CPP won all 58 seats in the country’s upper house or Senate in February.

The forum was a desperate effort by the CPP regime to legitimise its one-party rule and avoid punitive sanctions that the US and European Union threatened in the lead up to the July 29 poll.

Brussels and Washington have demanded that the main opposition party, the pro-Western Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) be reinstated and its jailed leader Kem Sokha released. The CPP-controlled Supreme Court dissolved the CNRP last November and Sokha was jailed on trumped-up treason charges.

Having suppressed its main rival, the CPP focussed its election campaign on a bid to prevent a low turnout. In the end, the government claimed an 83 percent turnout, up on 2013, with the CPP gaining 4,889,113, or 77.36 percent, of the valid votes counted. No one should credit this sham result. Even the official result pointed to widespread dissatisfaction, with 596,775 ballot papers, or 9 percent of votes cast, spoiled, up from 1.6 percent in 2013.

The pretext for banning the CNRP was the party's alleged links to Washington-funded organisations, including the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and involvement in a plan to bring down the government in a "colour revolution." At the same time, the NDI and media outlets linked to Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, set up to promote US imperialist interests, were forced to cease operations in Cambodia.

The CNRP undoubtedly has ties to US imperialism and its various agencies. However, it is a measure of the political bankruptcy of the CPP that it is compelled to resort to blatantly anti-democratic methods to ensure its grip on power. The CNRP has been able to falsely posture as the defender of workers and peasants precisely because of government's continuing attacks on living standards.

The CPP has ruled since the 1979 Vietnamese invasion that toppled the Pol Pot regime. Hun Sen's ruling clique was shaken in 2013 when the CNRP won 44 percent of the vote and 55 seats in the then 123-seat national assembly. In regional elections in June 2017, the CNRP increased its vote by over 13 percent while that of the CPP declined by almost 11 percent.

The regime calculated it would be voted out of office in last month's poll.

Following the November court ban on the CNRP, Hun Sen drove its 55 legislators out of the parliament and allocated their seats to minor parties. The CPP installed their own cronies in 489 positions of commune chief and 5,007 positions of councillor that had previously been occupied by the CNRP.

The CPP and the CNRP represent rival factions of the capitalist class. Both support the transformation of Cambodia into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors. Some 700,000 workers are engaged in the garment industries, which account for 70 percent of the country's exports, as well as in footwear, natural rubber, fish and other industries.

In 2013 and 2014, Hun Sen used the security forces to violently suppress the struggles of textile and garment workers over poor wages and appalling working conditions. Hun Sen only began to offer limited concessions when CNRP sought to posture as a defender of these workers.

The CNRP represents sections of the ruling elite frustrated by the domination of the Hun Sen regime and their exclusion from business opportunity, profits and power. The CNRP is oriented to Washington, which has provided aid to the opposition as a means of placing pressure on the ruling party.

The CPP government has sought to maintain and improve relations with the US and EU, which in 2016 were the destination for \$US10.1 billion, or 61 percent, of its exports.

Washington, however, is hostile to the government's orientation to Beijing, on which it relies for aid, investment and political support. Hun Sen has championed Beijing's interests inside the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) against Washington's drive for ASEAN support for its anti-China drive.

Chinese President Xi Jinping was the only major foreign leader to congratulate Hun Sen on the CPP's victory in the July poll. While the US announced aid cuts after the February upper house election, Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe visited Cambodia, promising increased defence cooperation and military aid.

Virtually all the \$2 billion foreign direct investment (FDI) flowing into Cambodia annually comes from Asia. The leading investors are China, South Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia and Japan. China, however, provides more FDI than all the others put together and accounts for more than \$20 billion worth of accumulated FDI stock.

At the same time, Cambodia depends heavily on the US as the country's biggest single market, taking more than \$US3 billion in exports. China accounts for only 6 percent of Cambodia's exports.

Concerned that Cambodia could move closer to China, the Trump administration has not imposed major economic penalties, such as ending its tariff-free export status. When the election results were announced on August 15, the US State Department responded by imposing limited extra visa restrictions on select officials.

However, as it escalates its confrontation over trade and other issues against China, Washington could also turn on Beijing's partners and allies, including Cambodia.