

CAMBODIA

Bitter Victory

Poll winners find it hard to grasp levers of power

By Nate Thayer in Phnom Penh

With the glow of the May elections long faded, the UN gone and a newly installed government trying to find its feet, diplomats and other observers are now trying to divine who holds real power in Cambodia.

Their conclusion is discouraging for those who viewed the UN-sponsored elections as heralding a new political era. The key levers of power in Cambodia, they agree, are held by those who emerged second to the party that won the popular mandate at the polls.

Funcinpec, the royalist party led by King Norodom Sihanouk's son Prince Norodom Ranariddh, and won the elections was awarded the leading role in the new coalition government. The party's representatives hold the key portfolios of the prime minister's office, foreign affairs and finance, while the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) — in effect the former ruling communist party — has the second prime ministership, key positions in the Council of Ministers, commerce, agriculture and the head of the National Assembly. The two parties also share the defence and interior ministries.

The minority Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party, the political wing of a US-backed guerilla army that fought the Vietnamese occupation forces and the regime Hanoi installed in Phnom Penh until the 1991 Paris peace accords formally ended the Cambodia civil war, was given the information portfolio.

But analysts say control of these ministries represents only a veneer of authority; real power in Cambodia resides with whoever runs the provincial political structures. Provincial officials effectively control the armed forces and security services, tax collection, civil service — and through them 80% of the Cambodian population. The country's provinces remain under the sway of the CPP, and respond to old political loyalties rather than central authority, analysts say.

Perhaps understandably, Funcinpec officials react to this analysis by arguing such a judgment is premature. In particular, they point out that their party did not have the authority during the three-month transitional government to take full control of the ministries Funcinpec was awarded.

"We will introduce Funcinpec cadres to all levels of ministries," Economics and Finance Minister Sam Rainsy told the REVIEW. "The CPP knows they are fighting a rearguard action. They know the trend is not for the CPP. The trend is for democracy. The development of the country means political transparency and that is against the CPP interests," he added.

Others were more pessimistic. "They [Funcinpec] control their offices, their cars, but they do not control the bureaucracy," one official close to Sihanouk said.

"The official titles are just theatre," said another source close to the king. "Inside, the roots of the CPP are too deep . . . The [previous] administrative and military structure has been maintained," he said.

Observers point to the Foreign Ministry



Ranariddh (left) with a former Khmer Rouge officer.

as an example of the difficulties Funcinpec has faced in assuming real control of their portfolios. Funcinpec sources say only two of their officials — Foreign Minister Prince Norodom Sinuudh and an assistant secretary of state — have been appointed to the ministry since they assumed control more than three months ago.

Rainsy admits it will be difficult for the central government to gain control of the provincial apparatus. Citing the *de facto* autonomy of the provinces, he said "we have had neither the time nor the political means to bring the provinces under central control." He added that "central authority has very little knowledge, not even to speak of control . . . of the provinces."

Each of Cambodia's 18 provinces are controlled by a governor whose real authority comes from the ubiquitous provincial CPP apparatus, which he heads. A

governor also traditionally controls the armed forces, security services and bureaucracy within the province. Further, governors report directly to the party rather than the state.

As the CPP structure remains wholly intact in the provinces, this gives enormous national power to people such as Interior and Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng of the CPP. Many analysts agree that Sar Kheng is emerging as one of the most powerful individuals in the new government.

Born in 1951 in Prey Veng province, he joined the Khmer Rouge on the day of Lon Nol's coup in March 1970 and steadily ascended through the faction's ranks.

Sar Kheng survived the 1976 purges and joined the resistance against Pol Pot's leadership in May 1978, months before the regime collapsed in the face of the Vietnamese invasion.

After the invasion, he served as secretary to then party head Pen Sovann, before Sovann himself was purged by the Vietnamese in 1981. Rising quickly through key party posts, he was elected to the central committee in 1984 and the politburo in 1988. In 1990, Sar Kheng was given the powerful post of president of the party's commission for organisation.

As head of the CPP organisation, he approved all appointments to party posts, including provincial governorships and scores of other key positions of influence in state organs.

When the peace accords required the CPP to remove direct party control over the components of government, Sar Kheng assumed the post of interior minister.

As an indication of Sar Kheng's rising stature, the REVIEW has learned that he has been invited on an forthcoming official visit to the US. The trip is intended to expose Sar Kheng to the mechanics of democracy and political pluralism, and will include an itinerary he largely designed himself. Sources say another reason for the trip is to wean him away from the influence of Vietnam, his patron during the past 14 years. "He appears to be a genuine reformer," one US official said, adding "we have no evidence he was involved in the death squads or anything like that."

Others dispute this view. They point out that political violence during the past year was a centrally directed campaign that only could happen with the sanction of the senior CPP leadership, including Sar Kheng.

Nevertheless, just as Funcinpec struggles to turn its trappings of power into the real thing, so the CPP's public face now looks increasingly like a mask. During the May elections many CPP party activists,

most of whom were loyal to former hardline party chief Chea Sim and Sar Kheng, were replaced on the ballot by technocrats and moderates loyal to the current Second Prime Minister Hun Sen in order to promote a reformist, moderate image. As a result, the CPP assembly is dominated by Hun Sen loyalists.

Diplomats say it now appears that, their duty done, Hun Sen and his faction are declining in influence. "Hun Sen knows that the Chea Sim group and Funcinpec want to eliminate him. He is weak, but still has real power," a senior official in the new government said.

The only group who can take comfort from this potential instability in the new government is the Khmer Rouge. Sources close to the Maoist faction say the Khmer Rouge remains confident the present government will collapse under the pressure of its internal conflicts. The sources forecast an increase in corruption, and say the declining economic base in rural areas will undermine the government's popular support after a short political "honeymoon."

The Khmer Rouge strategy is seen as



Hun Sen's influence has declined since the May polls.

maintaining control over its forces, encouraging instability in the countryside, exploiting discontent among Funcinpec cadres and waiting for an opportunity to seek a greater role in a future administration.

Nevertheless, more than 2,000 Khmer Rouge fighters have defected to the government in recent months, indicating a growing erosion of morale within guerilla ranks. However, it has become increasingly difficult for

any Cambodian faction to convince its troops to continue fighting since the 1991 peace agreement and the May elections. Indeed, sources say thousands of government soldiers have also deserted during the past year, mainly to return to their villages in the hope of finding work.

Many diplomats believe the Khmer Rouge has been severely weakened as an organisation, and that an effective government military campaign could deal it a mortal blow. "The Khmer Rouge are very weak — now is the time to get rid of them," a Phnom Penh-based diplomat said.

The REVIEW has learned the govern-

ment will indeed launch a major military offensive in the coming weeks against Khmer Rouge bases along the Thai border. "We are just waiting for the ammunition," a senior government official said. Other analysts, however, caution that if pushed, the Khmer Rouge will revert to guerilla tactics and melt back into rural communities with its political structure largely intact.

Perhaps for this reason, sources say that Sihanouk maintains direct contact with the Khmer Rouge, and remains convinced it should be brought into some power-sharing role for the sake of long-term stability. The sources point to the king's recent decision to bring senior Khmer Rouge diplomats into his personal cabinet in Peking as an indication of his sentiment towards the group.

While it is too early to predict which political trends will prevail, analysts agree the May elections bestowed a vital legitimacy of popular support on Funcinpec and forced the CPP to bow deeply to popular will.

What the polls have yet to achieve, however, is to alter the means and structures of how power is maintained and protected in Cambodia's political culture. As a result, the seemingly intractable factional divisions promise months — if not years — of political instability and low-level conflict. ■