

Cambodia's elections and aid: what will happen now?

By Colum Graham

Many of us have been wondering what will happen to aid flows to Cambodia after its July 28 election. With there now being a more sizeable opposition, it may mean that issues of accountability that have long plagued Cambodian governance are able to improve. But there is dispute over the number of seats won, and the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) [won't recognise the announced result](#) unless there's an independent investigation into the results. They claim that over a million voters were not properly registered, and thus denied electoral participation. The CNRP has threatened to stage a massive rally if this demand for an investigation is not met. As it stands, the CNRP has almost doubled its number of seats in parliament (from 29 to 55 seats compared to the ruling Cambodia's People's Party (CPP) 68 seats). Reasons behind the CNRP's electoral success [have been attributed to](#) the promise of greater incomes, which the CPP didn't match.

Meanwhile, the CPP government [has deployed the military](#) onto the streets of the capital Phnom Penh in response to the threats of protest. Perhaps a good indicator of the tension is that allegedly young soldiers in rural military units are being disarmed for the moment in case they are inclined to support the opposition. According to the U.S. State Department, the Cambodian government [cancelled military cooperation](#) exercises with the U.S., but according to the Cambodian Defence Ministry, military cooperation has merely been postponed. This latest round of gesturing comes amid threats emanating from the U.S. House of Representatives to [reduce its US\\$ 70 million aid program](#) to Cambodia's government based on the fairness of the election. To these threats, Prime Minister Hun Sen responded curtly: "If (the U.S.) wants to cut aid, just cut

it. Don't talk so much". Meanwhile, Washington has given [increasing support to Cambodia's](#) neighbouring authoritarian regime in Vietnam (who are not quite so disposed towards Beijing).

What's more certain than current U.S. strategic positioning is that Chinese aid will continue to flow into Cambodia. Just two weeks after the election, [Beijing has loaned Phnom Penh](#) US\$ 121 million for irrigation and power projects in Kampong Chhnang province. What's more, just days after the election, Beijing donated a thousand handguns and 50,000 bullets to Cambodia's National Police. How traditional donors manage their aid-based relationships with Phnom Penh will likely not be made clear to us in such a nebulous political landscape. But, if improving governance and accountability is their prime objective, negotiating how they support accountability while not alienating Hun Sen's CPP government will certainly be a determining factor.

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