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One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Cambodia's first-ever local-government elections on 2 February were a success. From a field of some 30 000 candidates, 11 251 council members were elected to some 1600 multi-member councils. Based on their combined 39 per cent share of the national vote, 3553 of these new councillors are from opposition parties: 2213 from Funcinpec (royalist party, and junior partner in the national coalition government) and 1340 from the Sam Rainsy Party (national opposition). The fact that most councils (1597 out of 1620) remain headed by Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) - as would be expected with a 61 per cent vote evenly spread across most of Cambodia - does not negate the fact that through these new multi-party local councils, a major element of democracy has been introduced.

One step back: The elections were not especially well greeted by the international community of Cambodia-watchers. As in past elections, the stories they highlighted were political killings. About 20 murders of opposition candidates took place during the campaign. About half were politically motivated. Ten political murders is ten too many, but compared with around 60 in 1998 and 100-200 in 1993, an improving trend is apparent. Generally, Sam Rainsy should be well content. On some reports, his party appears to have overhauled Funcinpec as the second most popular party after CPP. And the election gave him plenty of media exposure again to remind the world of Cambodia's alleged lack of democracy.

The second, major step back, just a few days later, was the United Nations' unilateral decision to cease cooperation with Cambodia in mounting Khmer Rouge leadership trials in a combined Cambodian-international court, under a new Cambodian law (passed in August 2001) on which the UN had advised in February-July 2000. The two reasons given by UN Legal Division Head Hans Corell in a press conference lacked truth or merit. They displayed a contempt for his listeners' knowledge of the history of the negotiation: which seems well deserved, as the supportive reaction of most media commentators and human rights NGOs to the decision displays a lazy disregard for the history of the troubled Cambodia-UN negotiation since 1999.

Those governments that have tried to facilitate Cambodia-UN negotiations over the past three years – the United States, the European Union, Japan, Australia - have all asked the UN to reconsider its decision. This tells its own story of where the blame should be placed. But Kofi Annan and Hans Corell may judge that the UN will get away with this latest betrayal of Cambodia. While the international terrorism issue continues to absorb the main energies of Western diplomacy, Cambodia is off the screen.

The UN's slap in the face for Cambodia is the latest example of the international humanitarian intervention lobby's continuing hatred of Hun Sen's government. They have never forgiven Hun Sen for retaining power after the 1993 UNTAC election, which was supposed to sweep him and his party away. The attempted Ranariddh-Khmer Rouge coup in 1997 similarly failed. Now we have the Corell coup: a clear sign that the anti-Hun Sen agenda remains in play, and that Cambodia must look to its international defences in the key national election year (2003) ahead.

WATCHPOINT: Will the major donor powers succeed in reversing the UN decision? If not, will they be brave enough, as a non-UN endorsed 'coalition of the willing', to give Cambodia the real help it needs (in terms of court resources and high-quality international judges) to make these trials internationally credible, according to the provisions of the August 2001 law?

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