

## **The Opposition Party and Democracy in Cambodia**

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### **Abstract**

Cambodia has conducted five consecutive national (1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013) and four local (2002, 2007, 2012, 2017) elections since the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991. Each election has brought some political space to the opposition parties. Although the party system and institutionalization is problematic and the opposition parties are aged weak in Cambodia, this study invites interested readers to examine the gradual evolution of the opposition party and its contribution to democracy. Using the party and democratic linkage model to assess the campaign, participation, ideology, representative, and policy linkage, this paper argues that despite the limited space for a political opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, which is currently the only opposition party, has moderate influenced to democracy in Cambodia.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, opposition party, democracy, political space

### **1. Introduction**

There are three possible paths that a regime will be likely transitioning either into “stable authoritarianism, unstable authoritarianism, or democratization” (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 37). Levitsky and Way (2010) both posit both domestic and international dimensions are the most important triggering factors to democratization. Following their claims, a regime will likely democratize if the international linkage is high; however, when it is medium or low, the regime outcomes depend on the international leverage and the incumbent organizational factors. When the organizational factors are high and the linkage is medium or low, an authoritarian regime is likely to remain stable. The authoritarian regime also remains stable when the organizational factors are either low or medium and the leverage is either low or medium. But, when the leverage is high and the incumbent institutions are low or medium, the regime will be unstable.

In their analysis, Levitsky and Way (2010, p. 337) situate Cambodia in “Stable Authoritarianism” as the international linkage is “Low” but “Leverage” is high while the organization power is “Medium High”. What has been missing in the analysis is the opposition dynamic factor. They argue that Cambodian opposition party is “poor” and less organized (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 69). Using similar theoretical grounds, Alexander (2008, p. 951) theorizes that the process toward democracy cannot be just simply explained by “state capacity, opposition, and international influence.” He argues that the influences of the structural factors can only facilitate the regime toward either democracy or authoritarian, but the strategic actor pursued by the elites can

accelerate the process. Unfortunately, this framework is not helpful to explain under what conditions that opposition parties can determine future democracy in a regime when power is transferred to them. To the extent that opposition party can be a driver force to democracy, and that the knowledge of it is under-theorized and attracts little attention (Garritzmann, 2017), there is a need to examine the role of the party in relation to democracy. Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (2011) provide an excellent framework to assess the party in relation to democracy with five-linkage mechanisms: campaign, participation, ideology, representative, and policy. These criteria are argued best described the linkage between voters and state in a representative democratic context. “When there is a strong connection between each of these linkages in the chain of party government, then representative government can function well as a means to connect citizen preferences to the outcomes of government”, claim Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister (2011, p. 7).

Although the level of the party system and party institutionalization in Cambodia is questionable (Peou, 2014), this article invites interested readers to examine the role of the opposition party in Cambodia under the argument that despite the limited space, it does make some contribution to the future democracy in Cambodia. Using Dalton, Farrell and McAllister’s (2011) framework, I assess the democratic linkage by examining the party’s campaign, participation, ideology, representative, and policy. What I will show is that, with the influence of the decentralization policy, the opposition party has slowly emerged and strengthened its base at the local level, and it has moderately influenced to democracy.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Political parties and its institutionalization in Cambodia**

Built on various previous works, Scott Mainwaring (1999) identifies four dimensions of party-system institutionalization: (1) stability in its appearance in competition, (2) strong roots in the society where citizen can easily think of, (3) legitimacy to their party and the electoral process, and (4) autonomy, cohesion, and discipline. If we based on the mentioned dimensions, Cambodia, historically, does not have such an institutionalized party-system. However, after the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 and UNTAC sponsored national election in May 1993, the system started to grow in Cambodian politics. The May election produced a coalition government with three main political parties, whose ideologies rooted with different grounds – the communist Cambodian People Party (CPP), the republic Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP), and the royalist with French acronym FUNCINPEC (FUN). The coalition government failed in a bloody factional fighting in 1997 between CPP and FUN, and a number of small political parties were created under the suspicious divided and ruled strategies done by the ruling CPP. The second election in 1998 brought two coalition parties (CPP and FUN) and a minor opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), whose former leader was then Finance Minister from FUN party in the previous coalition government. The opposition SRP has significantly gained popularity in 2003 while the coalition FUN has dramatically lost confidence from voters and then split into another party – Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP), in 2008. Both NRP and FUN has been bitterly defeated in 2008 and completely eliminated from Cambodian politics in 2013 election. SRP continued to gain support in 2008, but at the same time, there was another opposition--Human Rights Party (HRP) whose leader was a former senior political leader from BLDP. What was remarkable and surprised to many, including the ruling party CPP, was that the two opposition parties (SRP and HRP) merged into one new political party – Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in 2012 and secured a dramatic gain in

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a part of the report from my doctoral thesis which is focusing on the linkage of political decentralization to democracy in Cambodia. The field interviews with party leaders and observation were made from October 2016 to August 2017.

parliamentarian seats in the latest election in 2013, despite the credibility of elections are questionable. The table below illustrates the political parties and number of votes they obtained at the national election from 1993 to 2013. The next national election schedule is supposed to be held in 2018.

**Table 1. Political parties and their Votes**

Parties	1993		1998		2003		2008		2013	
	%Vot	Seats	%Votes	Seats	%Votes	Seats	%Votes	Seats	%Votes	Seats
FUN	45,47	58	31,7	43	20,75	26	5,05	2		0
CPP	38,23	51	41,4	64	47,35	73	58,11	90	48,83	68
BLDP	3,81	10								
Molinaka	1,37	1								
SRP			14,3	15	21,87	24	21,91	26		
NRP							5,62	2		
HRP							6,62	3		
CNRP									44,46	55
Total		120		122		123		123		123

Source: National Election Committee and author's own compilation

Under the political decentralization reform, a first local election emerged in February 2002, and this opened political space for political parties to have their representatives at the local communes/sangkats. There are more than twenty parties to compete in the election; however, only a few that gain popularity over time. Table 2 describes the number of representatives that each competing party gained at the three consecutive local elections from 2002 to 2012.

**Table 2. Party representatives at local Commune/Sangkat**

Election	Parties	Chief	1 <sup>st</sup> Deputy	2 <sup>nd</sup> Deputy	Councilors	Total
2002	CPP	1598	789	154	5162	7703
	FUN	10	547	852	801	2211
	SRP	13	285	615	433	1346
	Other	0	0	0	1	1
2007	CPP	1591	1125	185	5092	7993
	SRP	28	403	963	1266	2660
	FUN	2	47	155	70	274
	NRP	0	46	317	62	425
	Other	0	0	1	0	1
2012	CPP	1592	1056	250	5394	8292
	SRP	22	341	955	837	2155
	FUN	1	30	86	34	151
	NRP	0	5	24	23	52
	HRP	18	201	309	272	800
	Other	0	0	8	0	8

Source: National Election Committee

The latest local election in 2017 saw a significant increase of the representatives from the opposition party. CNRP, emerging from SRP and HRP, secured nearly 44 percent of the popular vote and its representatives took positions at the local offices up to 43 percent of the total seats. This

was a huge gain comparing to the ruling CPP who always took up to more than 90 percent from previous elections but dramatically decrease to 56 percent. Table 3 illustrates the number of the representatives from the two parties, which they obtained from the 2017 election.

**Table 3. Recent commune councils' election 2017**

	Political Parties		
	CPP	CNRP	Others
Number of Votes	3,540,056	3,056,824	377,031
% of Votes	50.76	43.83	5.41
Distribution of Seats in Commune/Sangkat Councilors			
Chief	1156	489	1
1 <sup>st</sup> Deputy	1139	503	4
2 <sup>nd</sup> Deputy	510	1087	49
Councilors	3698	2928	8
Total # of Seats	6503	5007	62
% of Seats	56.1	43.2	0.53

Source: National Election Committee

In addition to the ruling CPP, which was taken root in Cambodia since 1979, CNRP is arguably the institutionalized opposition party whose political history and legacy can be traced back since 1991. This could be supported by the fact that although the party had changed its name due to political oppression, it was stable and gained support from the local citizen from time to time. The current situation also confirmed that it is strong with the capacity to work although its leader had been imprisoned and self-imposed exiled.<sup>2</sup> The following section will discuss its democratic linkage.

### 3. The opposition CNRP and its democratic linkages

Under the agreement dated 17 July 2012 in Manila, the Philippines, HRP and SRP agreed to merge into one political party (CNRP) to challenge the ruling CPP under the vision of building a truly democratic, independent, and sovereign state where people have equal opportunity and rights to build their future prosperity. Although CNRP just came in 2012, Cambodian had known its leaders since 1991. The president of CNRP was Sam Rainsy, who was then finance minister from FUN party. After a political conflict, he was stripped of his position and then he founded Khmer Nation Party (KNP) in 1995. Unfortunately, his colleague occupied his KNP; he later changed the party to his name – Sam Rainsy Party in 1998. In addition, Senator Kem Sokha founded Human Rights Party (HRP) in 2007. Sokha was a member of parliament from BLDP, which merged with FUN, and he was elected as a senator in 1999. He resigned from his post in 2001 and founded the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) where he traveled across the country to train and encourage grassroots citizen to use their political rights. Finally, he resigned from the director of CCHR in 2005 and founded HRP. Until today HRP and SRP are still present although their local councilors and member of the parliament are registered with CNRP. The following will be the analysis of CNRP linkage to democracy based on a number of related literature, the interview with the party leaders and observation the campaign period from 20 May to 2 June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Rainsy, former SRP and CNRP's president, was self-imposed exiled due to many political crimes that have been charged by the court, which is known managed by the ruling CPP. Kem Sokha, former HRP and CNRP's vice-president who came to be the president of the party after Sam Rainsy left to France, was imprisoned under the charge of treason that international communities strongly condemned.

### 3.1 The Campaign Linkage

The first linkage between party and citizen is to the extent of how the party dominates the electoral process during the campaign period. To determine the level of party dominance, Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister (2011) examine four indicators: ballot access rules, media access and campaign communication, party finance and regulation, and electoral system design. Using their party-centered index (Dalton Farrell & McAllister, 2011, p. 47), this chapter indicates that CNRP has strongly controlled the campaign in the electoral process since (1) the electoral system is party-centered. (2) Such a system allows citizen to vote for a party rather than a candidate. (3) There are no state subsidies to or strict financial control over the party; thus the party fully coordinates the process to both collect fund and present policy choices with (4) rather free access to media. (5) State fully recognizes the role of the multi-party system in its constitution.

The Cambodian electoral law dictates tight control of parties over their closed-list candidates who will be elected through the propositional representation system. Thus, selecting and nominating candidates relies on party decision. For the commune/sangkat election in 2017, CNRP rules out 14 articles in its decision (N<sup>o</sup>1825/16 គណៈកម្មាធិការ) dated 01 December 2016 on how its subnational executive committee selects its commune/sangkat candidates. The selection is done in three steps. First, the public can apply to the selection committee at their respective commune, which consists of party members from the village, commune, and public movement. The selection committee has to prepare and list candidate chronologically by considering at least four criteria:<sup>3</sup> meeting NEC requirements, respected with virtue and morale, participating actively with the party or community, and being competent to work in the commune. Once there is no agreement reach, the second step is to create a coordination committee comprise of the selection committee at the commune, district, and provincial party executive members chaired by one working member at the provincial level and one deputy member from the district level. If the list can still not be made, the final step is to invite all interested citizen in the commune to elect his or her preferred candidate. Party deliberation and decision is dominating. Out of 1646 communes, only 17 that the candidate lists reach the last step, which requires direct poll from the local citizen.<sup>4</sup> Terminating a candidacy has remained under the decision of the party, which is granted by the law on party. On 20 May 2017, the first day of commune election campaign Kem Sokha, CNRP leader, promises that the CNRP commune/sangkat chief is to serve the people without corruption or nepotism. Once the people complain about such corruption or nepotism, the party will investigate and if necessary, replace the commune chief.

Political parties in Cambodia are not funded by the state no matter what the percentage of the vote is received. Although article 28 of the party law suggests that state may equally fund political parties during the parliamentary election campaign, this has never been applied. There is regulation, however, to ban political parties to receive any fund from public state institutions or foreign companies. CNRP gets funding from its membership contribution. According to the internal rule of the party, elected senators and members of parliament have to contribute 12 percent of their monthly salary to the party. Provincial, district and commune elected councils have to contribute 10 percent. Working-group members at provincial, district, and commune level as well as in the three national committees: executive, steering, and discipline have to contribute about 10 to 13 USD monthly to the party. During the campaign, each constituency is responsible to finance his or her own campaign with some contribution from the party central office. Most of the fund is from

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<sup>3</sup> CNRP guidelines on how to nominate members N<sup>o</sup>1826/16 (គណៈកម្មាធិការ) dated 1 December 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Report from CNRP shows that 10 communes from provinces of Prey Veng, 5 Siem Reap, 1 Kandal, and 1 Bantey Meanchy reach the final step.

supportive members abroad. The donation is usually made through individuals, which is rarely done through the party financial accounting system. This could be questioned about the transparency and managerial ability of the party over funding, but this suggests the strong linkage between CNRP and its members. The party is fully in charge of this.

Opposition party like SRP was known of its rhetorical racial appeal against illegal Vietnamese immigrants and border encroachment, yet since emerging to CNRP in 2013 national election, practical policy messages have been formulated. In 2017 commune election CNRP listed five main policies, one of which was for the upcoming national election in 2018. The first policy is to strengthen citizen power by creating commune association in order that citizen can effectively participate, evaluate, and advise on any development plan. The second is to raise living standard by consulting over loan seekers as well as to guarantee that any development plan will not affect to living condition of the local citizen but to improve better. The third is to equally deliver public documents without delay or extra fee that is not required by the law. The fourth is to determine to take necessary action against local crime and violence. Finally is to allocate a national budget of about 500.000 USD, which is equal to about 16.5 percent of the total national expenditure in 2017, to each commune if it wins national election. During the campaign period from 20 May to 2 June 2017, a committee was set up and chaired by the executive committee leader in its decision 008/17 dated 29 March 2017. President of the party was scheduled to travel across the 25 constituencies and speak at public places although the law restricts the freedom of campaign parade. Parties are not allowed to enter the markets, use Public Square without requesting prior permission, or move across from one commune territory to another. During the 14-day campaign period, state own television allows each party to equally have 7 minutes and 30 seconds daily to air the political message. Although public and private media is highly dominated by the ruling party, CNRP can still disseminate the messages through its Facebook page as well as radio stations. CNRP has yearly rent an hour daily from 105MHz and 93.5MHz radio stations.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2 The Participation Linkage

Mobilizing people to vote is another democratic linkage that political party has played a very crucial role. As argued, although the party membership has declined and voter turn out has dropped, parties still “play an important mobilizing role in elections” (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011, p. 74). CNRP’s strategy to mobilize people to vote and its assistance will be core analysis of the linkage criteria. Despite the challenges it has, CNRP strongly engages voters.

Voting is not compulsory in Cambodia. Overall, voter turn out at national level is declining over time after 1998: 86.78 percent of the total registered voters in 1993, 93.74 percent in 1998, 83.22 percent in 2003, 75.21 percent in 2008, and 68.49 percent in 2013.<sup>6</sup> The declining is also seen at commune/sangkat election: 87 percent in 2002, 67 percent in 2007, 60 percent in 2012, but surprisingly the percentage increased up to 90 percent in 2017. There are various reasons to explain, one of which is the unity of the two main opposition party and its effort to mobilize people although with limit capacity.

Cambodian opposition party, especially SRP, is argued to rely mostly on international community rather than focusing on local election campaign (Huge, 2001). This is partly true to the extent that the party could do in post-conflict society like Cambodia while being tightly controlled with repercussion and intimidation. The election campaign has never been equally and freely done

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<sup>5</sup> All the radio stations broadcasting the opposition party program, Voice of America, and Radio Free Asia were ordered to close in September 2017 under improper reasons.

<sup>6</sup> Documents obtains from the booklet produced by National Election Cambodia

since 1993. Without international community, it is hard to imagine what limited place it would be available for the opposition politicians. The amalgamation between SRP and HRP to CNRP has widened a considerable political space since election 2013. Former Senator Kem Sokha founded Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) in November 2002, where he traveled across the country to lecture on Human Rights and maneuvered people to demand them. Wherever his forum was, a lot of people would have come to express their concerns and complain nearly everything; unfortunately, he was arrested and imprisoned in December 2005 for a short period and then released after strong pressure from international community. He created HRP in 2007 and continued to give such a forum to grassroots people. Sam Rainsy is known as the “big boss of demonstration”, described by most local news affiliated to the ruling party CPP and Hun Sen. Demonstrations after an election is common in Cambodia since 1998. However, as noticed by an analyst, such protests actually give place for people to “rediscover themselves as both individuals and as an empowered collective” (Springer, 2009, p. 150).

Following from HRP and SRP legacy, CNRP has rigorously engaged and mobilized citizen to actively participate in politics as well as to get out to vote in a number of ways since before the campaign and during the campaign period in 2017. Party forums that provide space for citizen to express their consent and dissatisfaction remain a unique characteristic different from the ruling CPP. Interviews with senior opposition members reveal that this is one main strategy that the party could do to mobilize people. In addition, CNRP also relies on social media, especially Facebook that dominates Internet users in Cambodia, as the ruling party dominates the traditional ones.

The slogan of “change” has also been the main psychological appeal to citizen, effectively used by CNRP in 2013 election. IRI survey suggests that the first priority that people went out to vote for a particular party in the national election in 2013 was that the country needs a change (IRI 2014). The campaign election in 2017, however, CNRP was forced to drop the slogan “Changing commune chief serving political party to the chief serving people” from their political slogan as CPP threatened with lawsuit although there was no legal ground.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, during the campaign in 25 constituencies, CNRP president Kem Sokha still used the word “change” to inspire supporters and described what positive changes would that be when CNRP win at both local and national elections. CNRP had also instructed its local representatives to facilitate their local citizen in finding their names in the name list in the polling station. The interviews reveal that the party was very concern with this matter, as experienced, people’s name would be disappeared or appeared in another polling station when the Election Day came. COMFREL (2013) reported there were 11,139 irregular cases during the election 2013, most of which were that people could not find their name on the voting day.

The latest mobilization also met some structural challenges. CNRP had strongly advocated and called for an arrangement for millions of diaspora, most of whom are migrant workers, to register and vote, but this had always been rejected by the ruling party. In a letter to NEC dated 18 October 2016, Kem Sokha called for help migrant workers in Thailand to register to vote along the Khmer-Thai border. As required by law, people are allowed to only register and vote at the place where they have their national identity issued. This means migrant workers who live far away from their origin cannot register and vote at the nearest border province that is closed to, for example, Thailand. The law does not apply the same though to military officers who can register and vote at their duty station.<sup>8</sup> Another indirect challenge is that garment employees were not encouraged to go

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<sup>7</sup> See the report at <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/facing-legal-threat-cnarp-set-to-drop-campaign-slogan-126765/>

<sup>8</sup> This is believed the ruling party strategy to mobilize its supporter to vote where it thinks the opposition will definitely lose with some small extra votes. See report at <http://www.khmertimeskh.com/news/31044/>

to vote in the last commune/sangkat election 2017 as they were not given enough day off at work and they also faced pay cut when they came back late to work after the election. Usually, the government orders the factories to close, but not in this latest election.

Despite the fact that CNRP met challenges, they could manage to attract millions of supporter and made the significant gain at their local election of about 44 percent of the popular vote. Statistically, people prefer to vote for the opposition party at the national level rather than at the local level, and there is about 10 to 15 percent difference if comparing between the local and national election. Looking at this local popular vote, it is likely that CNRP will gain more than 50 percent in the coming national election in 2018; as a result, the participation linkage to democracy is strong.

### 3.3 The ideology linkage

Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister (2011) dedicate three chapters (4, 5 and 6) to demonstrate how the party ideology is closely linked to democracy. According to them, democracy demands that elections “provide the means for citizens to make party choices that reflect competing programs of government and thus represent their voters in the governing process” (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011, p. 153). To confirm the hypothesis, they test the Left-Right voters’ preference comparing to the political parties’ stance on the Left-Right dimension. This, however, is impossible to test with CNRP. There is no based line survey to precisely identify any particular political orientation that Cambodian value.<sup>9</sup> In addition, political parties in Cambodia always claim they are democrats supplied with extensive democratic policy platforms. With the limitation and adapting to their model, this part assesses CNRP’s ideology linkage through the following questions: (1) are people informed about policy choices and preference offered by CNRP? (2) Do people vote for CNRP based on the policy preference presented? These two questions are important to determine of voter choice as this answer to the extent that political parties “help voter determine who to vote for in an election” (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011, p. 217). It has found that this particular linkage is “moderate”.

It is noted that in a nationally represented survey conducted by Asian Foundation from May 19 to June 9, 2014, after the 2013 national election, with 1000 sample across the country with an estimated margin of errors of plus or minus three percent reveals that political parties in Cambodia failed to significantly inform voters about their policy differences. In a question asked, “What difference do you see, if any, between political parties in Cambodia today?” Only 7 percent indicate “ideology,” without any elaborated further while 9 percent said “no difference” and 31 percent knew that there was a difference but was unable to state it precisely (Asia Foundation, 2014, p. 29). Among those who saw the difference referred to “corruption” 28 percent, “commitment to development” 24 percent, “numbers/power/members in parliament” 24 percent, and “responsiveness to citizens” 19 percent. This is nothing surprised, as political observers would agree that policy choices and debate have not been rooted in Cambodian politics. Thus, we can assume that the party failed to inform policy choice to voters.

There are many reasons that explain the motive of people to rather vote for CNRP than the other party. First, as illustrated above, CNRP is led by two main opposition figures that are well known to Cambodians and the international community. These two are believed the champions for democracy as they have fought for this for their entire lives. Sam Rainsy was elected to be the president of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD), which is the only one regional alliance of liberal and democratic political parties in Asia, in 2012. In addition, the slogan of

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<sup>9</sup> Cambodia is not yet included in the World Value Data survey.

“change” they proposed during the election clearly attracted the voters who were fed up with the current government. As the recent survey revealed, 59 percent thought the country was moving into a “wrong direction”, in contrasting to 81 percent thought it was a “right direction” in 2003 (Asia Foundation 2014). Those who mentioned about the “wrong direction” perceived “corruption” were the most concerning part, followed by deforestation and other economic issues. This was what CNRP advocated for.

Corruption was also found as an important factor determined the country moving into a “wrong direction” in another public opinion survey funded by the International Republican Institute from October 28 to November 10, 2013 (IRI 2014). This survey was based on 2,000 face-to-face interviews with Cambodians whose aged were 18 up and represented across the country with the margin of errors of plus or minus 2.2 percent. Answering to the question “which factors were the most important to you when deciding which party to vote for in July 2013 election?” about 46 percent stated the “country needs a change,” which is the highest percentage comparing to other 35 percent who focused on “party leaders,” and 30 percent on “campaign promise” (IRI, 2014, p. 15).

Another interesting finding from the survey to the question of “which political party best represents your view on each of these issues?” indicated that CNRP represents 56 percent to “protecting workers,” 51 percent “protecting human rights,” 49 percent “protecting freedom of speech,” 45 percent “protecting farmers,” and 43 percent “puts people’s interests above their own political party” (IRI, 2014, p. 17). These percentages are higher than the ruling CPP. The table 5.4 below illustrates the comparison in percentage.

**Table 4. Which political party best represents your view on each of the issues?**

Parties	Workers	Human Rights	Freedom of speech	Farmers	People’s Interest
CNRP	56	51	49	45	43
CPP	32	35	34	43	41
FUN	1	1	1	1	1

Source: IRI (2014)

Although facing to the limitation, at least we can answer the two questions about the CNRP’s ideology linkage to democracy that, first, it had not yet informed its policy platform well enough to the people although observation suggested that the party had distributed leaflet, disseminating political messages through the limit media, and vigorously announced through public forums. The survey conducted by Asia Foundation (2014) suggested that limited numbers of people were informed. Finally, whether or not people had voted for CNRP because the party policies that represented the voters’ preferences were well supported by IRI (2014) to the fact that people really knew and credited CNRP. In conclusion, this ideology linkage to democracy shall be determined as “moderate”.

### 3.4 The representative linkage

The congruence of “voter-party policy” will provide “good evidence of a healthy representative linkage” (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011, p. 218). The democratic representativeness of a political party is examined to the extent of how its performance reflects the people’s will when the party is elected to the office. When attempting to use Dalton, Farrell and McAllister’s (2011) framework to analyze CNRP’s representative linkage, there are limitations that should be noted. Firstly, the ability of Cambodian people to use elections as a tool of democratic control is questionable as various sources independent reports suggest that elections in Cambodia after are always done under an unfair environment, where the ruling party subverts nearly every

democratic institution. Last, CNRP is an opposition party that never forms the government with the ruling party;<sup>10</sup> thus, its performance is not yet objectively able to evaluate. However, to satisfy this level of analysis we shall look at how the party had tried to be accountable and representable to its voters and influenced to democracy after being elected after the election. This study agrees with Dalton, Farrell and McAllister's (2011, p. 186) notion that democracy is an "ongoing process of representation and accountability occurs through retrospective as well as prospective evaluations of government performance." CNRP's commitment to being accountable and representable after the election 2013 will be scrutinized. Unfortunately, this linkage has been found "low".

As illustrated earlier, the opposition party has emerged and evolved since the national election in 1993. In the 2013 latest national election, CNRP secured more than 44 percent of the popular votes, only about 4 percent behind the ruling party CPP despite election fraud and irregularities are registered. With this momentum, one can argue that it should have formed the government with the ruling party and delivered its policy as promised during the election campaign. This, however, would miss past experience of what happened with FUN when it formed the government with CPP from 1993 to the current period that they did not even get elected a single commune chief in the 2017 local election. In retrospect, FUN won the majority in the 1993 national election, but its popularity went down due to many factors ranging from poor leadership to political sabotage from the ruling CPP. An interview with the senior CNRP reveals that FUN experience was a good lesson for CNRP to learn and adapt.<sup>11</sup> The CNRP leaders are very critical when dealing with CPP.

The government of Cambodia is formed through an absolute majority (50%+1) votes in the National Assembly, which consists of 123 elected members for the national election. So far the ruling CPP, with its majority voices, forms the government with ease. It can choose which party to partner with without any serious coalition agreement whenever it forms a government. The last election, however, made it difficult to go through, as CNRP was the only party that won 55 parliamentary seats, leaving CPP 68. Although CPP could form and ran the government alone, the constitution requires that at least two third of the elected members get an endorsement from the King to run the first National Assembly meeting. CNRP, on the other hand, chose to boycott and conduct peaceful demonstration against the irregularities and call for a re-election immediately and reform the flawed electoral system.

CNRP mobilized its supporters to demonstrate daily in the Freedom Park in Phnom Penh city. However, the one-year political deadlock ended with a bloody crackdown and a political deal to release 7 opposition lawmakers, who were arrested on the charge of "insurrection" during the protest. Both parties agreed to create a "culture of dialogue" and reform the National Election Committee (NEC) to Judiciary, yet only the new composition of NEC looks more positive. In the agreement dated 22 July 2014 to end the deadlock, CPP and CNRP agree to constitutionalize and reshuffle the National Election Committee, where previously dominated by CPP affiliated members. The new composition of NEC consists of 9 members, 4 nominated by the ruling party, 4 the opposition, and 1 chosen by consensus between the opposition and ruling party in the assembly. Putting this composition into the constitution guarantees that it is not easy for any political party to manage or manipulate, as it requires two third of the parliamentary members to make any amendment. Opposition leaders always claimed this was a big success; however, besides this

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<sup>10</sup> Even with a smaller party, SRP always declared its stance that it will not make a coalition government with the ruling CPP.

<sup>11</sup> Field interview with party leaders dated 24 March 2017

nothing else had been seriously reformed as spelled vaguely in the agreement regarding the judiciary, media, and military institutions.

By the time of this writing, the future of CNRP is not possible to predict as Sam Rainsy, CNRP president, has resigned due to the amendment of the party law. Kem Sokha, who became the president, has been arrested and put into prison under the charge of “treason.” The “culture of dialogue” had embarrassedly failed and the election in 2018 is not guaranteed.

With the entire attempt to reform and delivered policy promise, CNRP faced serious difficulty to become a responsible and accountable party to its voters. Thus, the representative linkage shall be evaluated as “low”.

### **3.5 The policy linkage**

The final party-linkage model to democracy ends to the extent that political parties’ policies keep serving and attracting voters. The core argument of the party-linkage model is that political parties “undertake a range of functions that are essential for the operation of representative democracy” (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011, p. 198). For this particular linkage, Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (2011) argue that political parties will not play any “substantial” role if they are “unable to make systematic changes to public policies” as they usually appeal to its voters (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011, p. 198). To confirm the proposition, Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (2011) use public expenditure to measure the influencing policy outputs. Following this proposition and with the limitation as noted above, this part will evaluate the level of influences that CNRP could have over the government policy. CNRP’s senior leaders claimed that the party should have won the election in 2013 if the national election committee had been fair enough.<sup>12</sup> With the rise of support, does CNRP really influence to the performance of the government? To evaluate this, it is necessary to compare what policy programs that CNRP proposed to voters during the election campaign to the government performance in this mandate. This linkage has been found “moderate”. In its 72-page booklet distributed during the national election campaign in 2013, CNRP described its manifesto and highlighted 7 priority policies that the party would immediately execute when it comes to power.<sup>13</sup> The seven-point political platform were the followings:

1. Provide state pension of 40,000 riels (about 10 US Dollar) to the senior citizen whose age is from 65 and above.
2. Set a minimum wage of 600,000 riels (about 150 US Dollar) to garment factory employee.
3. Increase monthly salary to the public servants with the basic of 1,000,000 riels (about 250 US Dollar).
4. Secure the price of agricultural products by ensuring that the rice product will at least be bought not less than 1,000 riels (about 0.25 US Dollar) per kilogram.
5. Poor citizen will receive free health care services.
6. Youth will have equal access to education and job. There will be a loan for students.
7. Reduce the price of gasoline, fertilizers, electricity and the interest rate.

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<sup>12</sup> CNRP claimed victory since immediately after the election. In the interview, they did believe that they won the election. Independent observers reluctantly shared the same view; however, they raised the same concern over the election fraud. See the report <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-opposition-rejects-election-result-alleges-widespread-fraud/1712558.html>

<sup>13</sup> The policy booklet can be downloaded in Khmer at [http://www.cnrp7.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/20130212\\_Policy\\_Book-1.pdf](http://www.cnrp7.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/20130212_Policy_Book-1.pdf)

Up to today, there are positive influences that can be observed as the followings. First, the government decided to revise the minimum wages for garment factory yearly with a group that consists of factory-owner representatives, labor unions, and government officials. It is noted that this garment sector contributes immensely to Cambodian economy as it is home to about 600,000 workers; however, little attention has been paid to the working conditions – poor health care system, long working hours, job insecurity, and most importantly low wage. The minimum salary before 2013 was about 61 USD. In contrast, this was surprisingly increased to 80 USD in mid-2013, 102 USD in 2014, 128 USD in 2015, 140 USD in 2016, and 153 USD in 2017. Latest announcement is that the salary for 2018 is 170 USD. It is about more than 250 percent increase starting from the pre-election in 2013. This 153 USD in 2017, however, did not meet the demand from the unions, who asked for 171 USD due to the rising of living cost. Another big achievement in this sector is a Health Insurance Scheme (HIS) was expanded to cover health care, treatment, and sick leave in early 2016. It is noted that the HIS was to be implemented in 2001, as the Labor Law formulated since 1997 required it; however, nothing serious had been done. In 2013, the governing body of this Social Security Fund decided unanimously to implement the HIS and expanded the coverage of more than 900,000 workers across the country from January 2016.

In addition, there is also an increase in civil servant salary. Before the election, the wage was about 50 USD and increased to 125 USD in 2014. The government declared a plan to increase of about 20 percent yearly to the basic salary and it will reach 250 USD by 2018; this is what CNRP outlined in the policy platform but the ruling party used to disregard by suggesting it was just a populist policy that cannot be done.<sup>14</sup> The salary of the commune/sangkat councils is another important point to examine. The government sub-decree dated July 11 in 2013, just a few days before the July 28 election, indicated that the salary of a commune/sangkat chief would increase from 37.5 USD to 75 USD in January 2014. Their salary kept increasing to 100 USD and 187.5 USD in the two last consecutive years of 2015 and 2016. The year of 2017 a commune chief's salary increases to 280 USD according to the sub-decree dated 17 March 2017. It is more than 500 percent increase in the last four years.

The price of electricity had also been reduced. In March 2016, the government had decided to reduce the cost of electricity to 0.12 USD per kilowatt-hour for those who consume 10 or fewer kilowatt-hours of energy per month. In April 2017, the price was reduced to 0.15 USD for those consuming less than 50 kilowatt-hours, while previously they pay around 0.21 USD. The gasoline price is also problematic in Cambodia. Whenever the price at the international market increases, it immediately increases, yet, it takes a longer time to reduce it although the international price dramatically drops. A group of civil society organization used to call for government intervention or it could “fuel unrest” as the price is the highest among the neighboring countries and this is hurting people's daily expense.<sup>15</sup> The opposition party argued that the government fails to regulate and protect against the elite monopoly firm as most of the owners are from the ruling family members. In 2015, the Ministry of Mine and Energy announced a plan to consider fuel price legislation and called for the company to reduce the price immediately according to the market. In March 2016, the Ministry of Commerce announced a ceiling price that would be calculated based on Means of Platts Singapore (MOPS) benchmark, taxes, VAT, and local operating costs that relevant ministries

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<sup>14</sup> See Ponniah, K., & Channyda, C. (2014, 24 October). Gov't announces wage raise for civil servants. *Phnom Penh Post* available at <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/gov%E2%80%99t-announces-wage-raise-civil-servants>

<sup>15</sup> See the report at RFA. (2012). Gas Prices Could Fuel Unrest. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/gas-04092012173915.html>

and private sectors agree in every tenth-day meeting – namely on 1<sup>st</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> of the month. According to the Prakas (legal announcement at Ministerial level) dated 6 March 2016, any petroleum retailers that do not follow the “ceiling price” would be fined. Until this point in time, there is no law adopted yet, but this is a significant development to secure the fair price that could help reduce the cost of production and living expense of the citizen. Opposition leader urged for a legal deal with this issue as he reiterated, “A legislative approach could be positive by possibly bringing about more transparency and being more conducive to public debate the now opaque petrol distribution industry.”<sup>16</sup>

As illustrated above, almost the entire priority policy platform that CNRP proposed during the election campaign was immediately reformed and improved. This was the significant change in this fifth mandate. However, there remain serious challenges to tackle with corruption, deforestation, land grabs, forced eviction, and political oppression. It seems that the government has tried to respond to the losing electoral votes by sticking with the mild reforms, which were easily visible to the public rather than committing itself to strengthen the rule of law and building a more democratic society. In contrast, the government has passed a controversial law on political party on 10 July 2017 to effectively ban Sam Rainsy from being the CNRP’s president. The vice-president, Kem Sokha who later became the president, was arrested in the mid-night 3 September 2017 and now was under custody. Radio stations that broadcasting from Radio Free Asia and Voice of America were ordered to shut down. The vocal independent English and Khmer newspaper (The Cambodia Daily) was being forced to shut down on the tax issue, which was believed a political motivation.

Answering to the question whether or not CNRP influences to public policy can be dichotomous. On the one hand, it does have influences as some social policies that have been described above were reformed and improved. On the other hand, CNRP popularity is seen as a threat to the ruling party, thus, need to be weakened and destroyed. This is threatening to the survival of democracy in Cambodia. This party policy linkage is “moderate”.

#### 4. Conclusion

The article seeks to examine to what extent the opposition party has influenced to democracy in Cambodia. To achieve this, the article starts with a brief background of the opposition party and how it evolves. Using Dalton, Farrell and McAllister’s (2011) party and democratic linkage model, the analysis has found that (1) the opposition party has strongly engaged with the campaign linkage through its tight control over the campaign in the electoral process. The party takes control in the selection of the candidates for the election and dominates the campaign process. With current electoral system and regulation, the party is even stronger and fully in charge in the campaign; (2) it has strongly engaged in mobilizing people to vote. Although it faces some structural issues, the unity of the opposition attracts voters and makes it gain popular support in both of national election in 2013 and local election in 2017. Voter turned out at the last local election was around 90 percent that was the highest number if comparing to the four previous elections; (3) the ideological linkage that determines how parties help voters to vote for a particular course has been found “moderate.” Cambodians are not really able to distinguish ideological differences between political parties. As there are only two main parties – opposition and the ruling, people who are suffering from social and economic situation tend to prefer a change and see the opposition party as an alternative; (4) the representative linkage has been found “low”. The opposition party has faced a lot of challenges in

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<sup>16</sup> See Morton, E. (2015, 22 January). Gov’t considers fuel legislation. *Phnom Penh Post* available at <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/govt-considers-fuel-legislation>

term of trying to be accountable and representative. When trying to exert its leverage to change through negotiation with the ruling, there is only one positive move that it can make, which is the constitutionalized national election committee; (5) the last policy linkage criteria has been scrutinized. To attract voters, the opposition party has highlighted 7-point meaningful policy priorities. The government has positively responded to most of these policies; however, this popular policy cannot be claimed as highly influenced to democracy as other's account such as civil society, independent media, and the opposition party itself have been subjected to intimidation and oppression. As a result, this last linkage is found "moderate".

**Table 5. Summary of party linkages, description and the assigned score**

	Description Level	Assigned Score
Campaign	Strong	4
Participation	Strong	4
Ideology	Moderate	3
Representative	Low	2
Policy	Moderate	3
Total	Moderate	3.2

If a five-point scale is given to each of the linkage criteria with 5 equals to "very strong," 4 "strong," 3 "moderate," and 1 "low," a sum up of all the scores and divide to 5 will generate a medium score of 3.2, which is slightly above the "moderate" level. See the table 5 for the summary of the assigned score. This concludes that despite all the challenges, the opposition does make some "moderate" influence on the democracy in Cambodia.

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