

# The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

## Government in Cambodia Cracks Down on Opposition

Cambodia has drawn international criticism in the past week for the government's crackdown on opposition politicians. The government of Cambodia, led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, has leveled baseless accusations of treason against many opposition leaders which has raised concern over Cambodia's commitment to democracy. Sen has ruled Cambodia for the better part of forty years, and done so with an iron fist. The latest crackdown follows last year's elections, in which Sen's party won 100% of the parliamentary seats after the Supreme Court banned the opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, from running.

Many leaders of the Cambodia National Rescue Party live abroad in self-imposed exile, including Sam Rainsy, the founder and leader of the party. In a dramatic move, Rainsy announced that he would be returning to Cambodia to rally the opposition against the Prime Minister on Cambodia's Independence Day. This sent the Cambodian authorities into a frenzy, and they arbitrarily detained over forty members of the opposition. Rainsy tweeted a photo of his plane ticket from Paris to Bangkok, but was prevented from checking into his flight in Paris. This has caused concern among international organizations, as the Cambodian government is pressuring neighboring countries to detain any members of the opposition who enter their territory. Mu Sochua, the opposition's vice-president who currently resides in the United States, was stopped and detained in Malaysia while transiting the country to reach Cambodia. The Cambodian Government has cited a policy followed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to not interfere in each other's domestic politics as justification for requesting that the opposition leaders be arrested and handed over on charges of treason. Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam have been accused by international rights organizations of caving to pressure from Cambodian authorities and removing opposition leaders on invalid grounds.

Hun Sen accuses the Cambodia National Rescue Party of attempting to stage a coup, but there is no evidence to support this claim. Sam Rainsy has stated that his goal is to bring about an end to the Sen dictatorship, namely through free and fair elections. Rainsy has spent four years in Cambodia's political wilderness, and is seeking to improve democratic processes in the country. Mu Sochua has claimed that the current situation in Cambodia bears similarities to the practices of the Khmer Rouge, which is a damning indictment given the death and destruction brought about under their rule.

The Cambodian government has only relented their crackdown on the opposition when threatened by the European Union. Currently, the EU accounts for over a third of Cambodia's exports, and its governing body is reconsidering Cambodia's status on its list of preferred trading partners. Moving forward, Rainsy and Sochua do not appear to be deterred by the government's threat of arrest should they enter the country. Both have pledged to return to Cambodia, and are working to restore democracy within it.