



Cambodia

Overview

The Department of State refers to the Kingdom of Cambodia, located in mainland Southeast Asia, as “strategically significant.” Bilateral relations have become strained during the past decade, particularly as Cambodia’s relationship with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has grown closer and after Prime Minister Hun Sen banned the main opposition party in 2017. The U.S. government has sought to remain engaged with Cambodia while calling on Hun Sen to restore political rights and resist PRC influence. The United States has imposed restrictions on some foreign assistance in response to human rights concerns and it continues to provide support to Cambodian civil society. Some observers contend that Cambodian civil society, independent journalists, and urban youth are particularly receptive to continued U.S. engagement.

In 2017, the Cambodian government suspended Angkor Sentinel, an annual joint exercise between U.S. Army Pacific and the Royal Cambodian Army first held in 2010. In 2018, the U.S. government suspended military assistance to Cambodia in response to its government’s suppression of the political opposition.

Politics and Human Rights

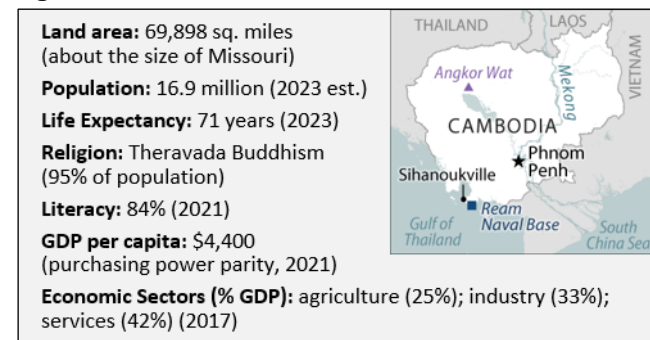
Hun Sen has been the nation’s head of government for 38 years, including as premier of the Vietnam-backed Republic of Kampuchea between 1985 and 1993. Since 1993, he has headed the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and served as prime minister of Cambodia, including as “co-premier” between 1993 and 1997. In 2021, the CPP reportedly endorsed the eldest son of Hun Sen, West Point graduate Hun Manet, as his successor. Hun Manet reportedly aims to run for a parliamentary seat in the next national election, scheduled for July 2023. A win, which is considered highly probable, would make him eligible for the premiership. The king of Cambodia and head of state, a largely symbolic figure, is Norodom Sihamoni, who succeeded his father in 2004.

Between 1993, when the United Nations administered Cambodia’s first national election following the 1991 Paris Agreements that ended the country’s civil war, and 2017, democratic institutions and practices had gradually evolved to allow widespread civic and political participation. During this period, Cambodia developed a vibrant civil society and a relatively free print media. The opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) made significant gains in the 2013 parliamentary election and 2017 local elections. In November 2017, the Supreme Court of Cambodia, allegedly at the behest of the government, issued a ruling that dissolved the CNRP for “conspiring with the United States to overthrow the government.” The CPP subsequently won all 125 seats in the 2018 National Assembly election. In the 2022 local elections, the CPP

won 80% of commune council seats. The Candlelight Party, a revived opposition party that has attracted former CNRP members, won 18%.

Cambodian courts have convicted opposition leader and former CNRP President Sam Rainsy, who lives in self-imposed exile in France, of numerous crimes that many observers view as politically motivated. In October 2022, a Cambodian court sentenced Sam Rainsy in absentia to life in prison, on top of previous sentences. In April 2023, former CNRP Vice-President Kem Sokha was convicted of treason and sentenced to 27 years of house arrest. The Department of State issued a statement asserting, “Kem Sokha’s conviction is part of a larger pattern of threats, harassment, and other unacceptable actions by Cambodian authorities to target political opposition leaders, media, and civil society.” Since 2021, Cambodian courts have convicted over 115 opposition politicians and activists of crimes against the state. In April 2023, a Cambodian court charged the Candlelight Party’s Vice President, Thach Setha, with “incitement to provoke chaos,” which likely will prevent him from running in the 2023 national election.

Figure 1. Cambodia at a Glance



Source: CRS (map) and Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2023.

Since the lead up to the 2018 national election, Hun Sen has clamped down on civil society and circumscribed the space for independent media. In 2017, the Cambodian Foreign Ministry applied a restrictive new law on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to expel the U.S. government-funded National Democratic Institute, which was engaged in democracy promotion programs in Cambodia, on the grounds that it was not registered with the government. Roughly 25 human rights NGOs still operate in Cambodia, according to the Department of State, although they face increasing repression. In 2017, the government closed more than one dozen radio stations that sold airtime to U.S. government-funded Voice of America and Radio Free Asia.

Human rights groups report that the Cambodian government restricts freedom of expression and the press in

various ways, including through defamation lawsuits, criminal prosecutions, tax penalties, disapproval of permits and licenses, and harassment of journalists. In February 2023, the government revoked the media license of Voice of Democracy, a local radio and online media outlet, for “disseminating false information.” Some observers surmise that the action may be related to the outlet’s investigative reporting on human rights issues.

Economy and PRC Influence

Since the early 1990s, Cambodia has made progress on some socioeconomic indicators, although it remains one of the poorest countries in Asia, and poverty and malnutrition in rural areas persist. The economy—which was largely destroyed under the leadership of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, also known as the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), and subsequent conflicts—achieved an average annual growth rate of 8% between 1998 and 2019, largely driven by foreign investment and the agricultural, garment, construction, real estate, and tourism sectors. Following a downturn in 2020-2021 due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the economy has rebounded somewhat, and the Asian Development Bank forecasts it will achieve a growth rate of over 5.0% in 2023.

The United States is Cambodia’s second-largest trading partner after China, and its largest export market, purchasing 44% Cambodia’s exports in 2022, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). Cambodian exports to the United States totaled \$12.2 billion in 2022, while imports from the United States totaled \$449 million. The largest Cambodian export items to the United States are apparel and leather goods, and the largest U.S. import items are vehicles. Hun Sen reportedly welcomes greater U.S. investment. In 2022, the U.S.-Association of Southeast Asian Nations Business Council organized a delegation of U.S. companies to meet with Cambodian officials to discuss expanding U.S.-Cambodian trade and investment ties. The garment sector—which is largely run by companies from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—forms a pillar of Cambodia’s economy, employing roughly one million workers, predominantly women. The EIU reported that garments and footwear accounted for 54.8% of Cambodian goods exports in 2022.

China is Cambodia’s largest source of imports, including fabric for the kingdom’s garment industry, as well as its largest foreign investor and a major source of financing, holding 42.7% of the kingdom’s foreign debt in 2021, according to the EIU. PRC-backed infrastructure and hydropower projects and business ventures have brought some developmental benefits while also creating environmental problems, contributing to corruption, and causing disruptions and dislocation among some local communities. PRC investment has been particularly concentrated in the city of Sihanoukville and elsewhere along the Gulf of Thailand, with development projects including the construction of tourist and gambling resorts, industrial zones, an international airport at Dara Sakor, and a deep-water seaport in Kampot province. U.S. analysts express concern that the airport and seaport could be used for military as well as civilian purposes. PRC investors reportedly have left over 1,000 unfinished and abandoned

buildings in Sihanoukville following the halt of construction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ream Naval Base

Since 2018, U.S. concerns have grown regarding PRC construction activities at Ream Naval Base. Some experts argue that China may aim to use Cambodia to project power further from the PRC mainland and to use Ream as a station to service its naval vessels. Cambodian officials have emphasized that hosting a foreign military facility would be unconstitutional, although the government may provide access to multiple countries. PRC officials reportedly have confirmed that “a portion of the base” would be used by the Chinese military, although they denied that Cambodia has given China exclusive rights to Ream.

Foreign Assistance and Sanctions

Cambodia is heavily dependent upon foreign aid. Official Development Assistance (ODA) for Cambodia from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries (not including China) and international financial institutions totaled \$1.02 billion in 2021. The United States provided \$100.5 million in assistance to Cambodia in FY2022, mostly channeled through NGOs. Major program areas include maternal and child health, combating infectious diseases, basic education, human rights and democracy, reducing human trafficking, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and natural resource management. From 1993 to 2022, the U.S. government provided \$192 million for unexploded ordnance removal and related programs. Cambodia is among the countries most heavily contaminated by unexploded ordnance left from U.S. bombing during the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and civil wars during the 1970s and 1980s. Peace Corps volunteers teach English and train English teachers in Cambodian villages.

Since FY2017, State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations legislation have placed conditions on some U.S. assistance to Cambodia due to human rights and other concerns. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, FY2023 (P.L. 117-328, Section 7043(b)) prohibits assistance to the government of Cambodia unless the Secretary of State certifies that Cambodia is taking effective steps to assert its sovereignty against interference by the PRC, including by verifiably maintaining the neutrality of Ream Naval Base; cease violence, threats, and harassment against civil society and the political opposition; and respect the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities enshrined in the 1993 Constitution of Cambodia, among other provisions. In December 2021, the Commerce and State Departments imposed export restrictions on U.S. national security-controlled items and a ban on arms sales to Cambodia due to human rights concerns. Since 2018, the U.S. government has sanctioned five Cambodian officials and family members for corruption and human rights abuses pursuant to Executive Order 13818, which implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328). For further information, see CRS Report R44037, *Cambodia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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