

## Hun Sen: 26 Years At The Helm

2011-01-21

Cambodia's rights record may worsen under continued rule, rights activists warn.



AFP

*Hun Sen releases a dove at a ceremony marking the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in Phnom Penh, Jan. 7, 2011.*

Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen marked 26 years in power last week, winning praise from his party for bringing growth and slashing poverty but criticized by rights activists for stifling freedom, silencing the opposition, and fostering corruption.

The 59-year-old Hun Sen is the longest-serving leader in Southeast Asia after the Sultan of Brunei and has vowed to remain in power for another decade, with a vision to bolster the economy by boosting rice exports and the incomes of Cambodians who now largely rely on the garment and textile industry.

"If I am still alive, I will continue to stand as a candidate until I am 90," he said in 2007. But two years later, he said he would be out by 2023.

Chea Sim, head of the ruling Cambodian People's Party, said it would continue to pick Hun Sen as the Prime Minister after the next general elections in 2013, which it is confident of sweeping.

He said that Hun Sen had brought peace to the country, once ruled by the fanatically communist Khmer Rouge which caused the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people, and that he has maintained a democratic government based on the rule of law.

Other party officials said the prime minister has helped fuel economic growth, slashed poverty, and brought political stability.

### Rights violations

But opposition leaders and rights groups say Hun Sen's continued rule will only worsen human rights violations and corruption and result in authoritarian rule.

"I think Hun Sen wants to consolidate power," said Brad Adams, executive director of New York-based Human Rights Watch's Asia Division.

"He wants to finish up his critics in Cambodia. He wants a one-party state even though he pretends to hold elections once every five years because he can manage and win them automatically."

Adams also accused Hun Sen of wanting "to control all Cambodia's resources, and he is changing Cambodia towards capitalism under dictatorship."

Cambodia was among 25 countries whose freedom levels plunged in 2010 amid an erosion of civil rights and political liberties, according to global watchdog Freedom House.

"Cambodia received a downward trend arrow due to the government's consolidation of control over all aspects of the electoral process, its increased intimidation of civil society, and its apparent influence over the tribunal trying former members" of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, the group said in a report last week.

Transparency International, the Berlin-based monitoring group, said in a recent report that 43 percent of Cambodians polled said corruption had increased and 30 percent felt it had decreased, while 27 percent believed it was around the same.

Cambodia's judiciary was found to be the most corrupt sector in that country, it said.

### Busting graft

But Hun Sen's Office of the Council of Ministers said the authorities are moving forcefully to end graft.

"Cambodia now has an Anti-Corruption Law, and the Anti-Corruption Unit is actively and publicly pursuing cases of alleged corruption," it said.

The Office of the Council of Ministers also dismissed criticism of Hun Sen's long hold on power, citing former prime ministers Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew of neighboring countries Malaysia and Singapore respectively who were also at the helm for many years.