

# New Prime Minister, New Hope for Cambodia

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Cambodia held its general election on July 23, 2023 to choose a winning political party that will form a new democratic government to lead Cambodia for the next five years. It is the seventh general election since the United Nations-administered general election in 1993. Provisional results announced by the National Election Committee showed that the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won 120 out of 125 parliamentary seats. The remaining five seats were won by the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia, commonly known as FUNCINPEC, a royalist party (The Phnom Penh Post, 2023b).

Prior to the national elections this year, there were rumors, speculations, predictions, and analyses regarding the future of Cambodian politics, particularly about when and how the power transfer, albeit through a democratic electoral process, would be conducted (see Heng, 2020; Sutton, 2018). Although it was certain that Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen would hand over power to his eldest son, Hun Manet, a four-star general and commander of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, who was internally voted by the CPP's Central Committee to be the next prime minister candidate of the Party at the 43rd Central Committee Meeting of the 5th Mandate of the CPP in December 2021, no one was entirely sure of how and when.

However, all doubts about the next top leader of Cambodia have now been dispelled. On July 26,

2023, three days after the election, Prime Minister Hun Sen addressed the nation, stating that he had decided to step down from power, despite being the leader of the winning party, to give a chance for the next generation to lead Cambodia after the election (The Phnom Penh Post, 2023a). Alongside him were a number of high-level politicians who would also step down from their positions as deputy prime ministers, senior ministers, or ministers. A couple of weeks before the July 23 election, a document about the new Cabinet was leaked, in which Hun Manet was granted the role as the prime minister of Cambodia in place of incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has been the Cambodian Prime Minister for 38 years (see Hutt, 2023).

In the list of the new Cabinet members that was leaked, there are a total of 52 names. Of them, 10 are in the rank of deputy prime ministers, 11 are senior ministers, and the 30 are ministers. It is important to note that a few important individuals hold dual positions as a deputy prime minister and a minister. What is highly interesting about the leaked document of the new Cabinet members is the high number of new names or "new blood" added to the list. Except for only 14 names who are the old guard, including Aun Pornmoniroth, Hangchuon Naron, and the like, the rest are new names who would become the new prime minister, deputy prime ministers, senior ministers, and ministers. These new Cabinet members are, however, mostly the children of senior CPP

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politicians who planned to exit Cambodian politics due mainly to old age and the right timing for power transfer to the younger generation.

After Prime Minister Hun Sen announced his decision to step down from his premiership to start a new era of Cambodian politics after almost four decades, scores of support letters or messages for his decision were shared on social media. Notably, a group of foreign-trained PhD holders, 42 Cambodian educated people in total, expressed their full support of Hun Sen's decision to allow Hun Manet to be Cambodia's next leader in about three weeks, specifically on 22 August 2023 (Fresh News, 2023).

This decision to transfer power comes at the right time when Cambodian politics is not as muddy as in the aftermath of the 2018 elections. Although some analysts may perceive this handing of power not to be in the best interests of Cambodian people due to the political nature of the power transfer, there are advantages that can offer new hope for Cambodian society in the short and long term.

In the short term, as Cambodia's power transition seems to be smooth, it provides a strong foundation for the country to free itself from political deadlocks and other consequences. Cambodia can therefore have sufficient time to tackle many pressing issues, including the need to sustain its economic recovery, after the country has gradually recovered from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, because this power transfer sooner or later will take place, it may be crucial to begin it earlier rather than later, especially with the current political environment without much contending challenges that could create political instability, potentially plunging Cambodia into political chaos or worse.

In the long term, Cambodia can certainly benefit from having a new prime minister. As PM Hun Sen has been in power for many years, some Western or democratic countries do not really take pleasure in it. This has arguably contributed to constraining Cambodia's international image (Heng, 2020).

Thus, having a new premier will usher in a new era of both domestic and international politics, which will in turn improve prospects for Cambodia's foreign relations, particularly with Western countries.









Although it remains to be seen how future Prime Minister Hun Manet will lead Cambodia and how his leadership will bring about continued peace, development, and prosperity, built by the ruling party over the last few decades, there is new hope on the horizon. Moving forward, it is important that all stakeholders – politicians, professionals, peasants, and Cambodian people in general – join hands and work together under the new government to help Cambodia realize its 2030 and 2050 Vision to make Cambodia great again.

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