



Cambodia

Overview

U.S. relations with the Kingdom of Cambodia have become strained over 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 in Cambodia while calling on Hun Sen to restore political rights and resist PRC influence. The U.S. government has provided support to Cambodian civil society and has imposed restrictions on foreign assistance and sanctions on some Cambodian officials.

In 2017, the Cambodian government suspended Angkor Sentinel, an annual exercise between U.S. Army Pacific and the Royal Cambodian Army that was first held in 2010, saying that security forces were needed for other purposes. In 2018, the U.S. government suspended military assistance to Cambodia in response to the government’s suppression of the political opposition. The two sides continue to cooperate on activities aimed at accounting for U.S. Prisoners of War and Missing in Action from the Vietnam War era. Two bills introduced in the 117th Congress, S. 3052 and H.R. 4686, would impose sanctions on senior Cambodian officials the President has determined have directly and substantially undermined democracy or engaged in serious human rights abuses.

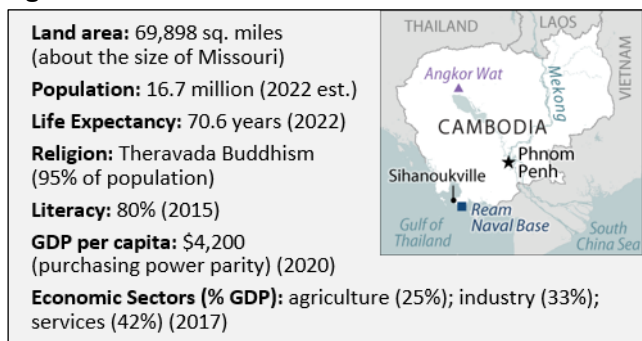
Politics and Human Rights

Hun Sen has been the nation’s head of government for 37 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. The king of Cambodia and head of state, a largely symbolic figure, is Norodom Sihamoni, who succeeded his father, Norodom Sihanouk, in 2004.

Between 1993, when the United Nations administered Cambodia’s first national elections following the 1991 Paris Agreements, 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 Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP)—a union of two opposition parties led by Sam Rainsy, a long-time opposition leader, and politician and human rights activist Kem Sokha—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.”

After banning the CNRP, the government charged Kem Sokha with collaborating with the United States to foment a popular overthrow of the CPP. Sam Rainsy, facing numerous charges and convictions that many observers view as politically motivated, lives in self-imposed exile in France. Since 2021, Cambodian courts have convicted nearly 90 former CNRP politicians and opposition activists of crimes against the state. Facing a significantly hindered opposition, the CPP won 80% of commune council seats in the June 2022 local elections. The Candlelight Party, a recently revived opposition party that has attracted former CNRP members, won 18%. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported pre-election threats, intimidation, and obstruction. The next parliamentary election is scheduled for July 2023.

Figure 1. Cambodia at a Glance



Source: Map: CRS; other information: Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2022.

Hun Sen also has clamped down on civil society and the media in recent years. 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.

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, approval of permits and licenses, and occasional violent attacks on journalists by unidentified perpetrators. 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, which, facing political and economic pressure from the Cambodian government, closed its Phnom Penh office. Authorities also ordered the English-language *Cambodia Daily*, considered an opposition newspaper, to

shut down in 2017, ostensibly for failing to pay taxes. The paper's publishers asserted that the tax claims were politically motivated. According to some observers, the 2018 sale of the *Phnom Penh Post*, another major English language daily, to a Malaysian businessman with ties to Hun Sen represented a final blow for established independent journalism in the kingdom.

Economy

Since the early 1990s, Cambodia has made progress on some socioeconomic indicators, although poverty and malnutrition in rural areas persist. The economy—which was largely destroyed during 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 development of the agricultural, garment, construction, real estate, and tourism sectors. More recently, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened major sectors of the economy.

The United States is Cambodia's largest export market and second-largest trading partner after China. Cambodian exports to the United States totaled \$7.4 billion in 2021, while imports from the United States totaled \$332 million. The largest Cambodian export items to the United States that year were apparel and leather goods, and the largest U.S. import items were vehicles. By comparison, Cambodia's imports from China, which include fabric for the country's garment industry, have far exceeded its exports to China. Cambodia's garment industry—which is largely run by companies from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—forms a pillar of the nation's economy, employing roughly 900,000 workers. Garments and footwear accounted for 41.2% of Cambodian goods exports in 2021, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU).

China is Cambodia's largest foreign investor, with \$2.32 billion in investment in 2021, according to PRC sources. China is also a major provider of financing and holds 44.3% of the nation's foreign debt, according to 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 companies are constructing a \$3.8 billion deep-water port, industrial zone, and tourist facilities near the town of Sihanoukville. Other PRC construction activities include an international airport at Dara Sakor that some analysts believe could be used for military as well as civilian purposes.

Foreign Assistance and Sanctions

Foreign assistance accounts for over 20% of the government's budget. Official Development Assistance (ODA) for Cambodia from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries and international financial institutions totaled \$1.37 billion in 2020, which does not include assistance from China. China is not a member of the OECD, and PRC assistance often does not meet OECD standards for ODA due to its large non-concessional loan component, commercial aspects, and economic benefits accruing to China.

The United States provided \$94 million in assistance to Cambodia in FY2021, mostly channeled through NGOs. Major program areas include preventing child and maternal deaths and combating infectious diseases, advancing human rights and democracy, promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, improving natural resource management, and combating human trafficking. From 1993 to 2021, the U.S. government contributed \$180.4 million for unexploded ordnance removal and disposal 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.

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, 2022 (P.L. 117-103, 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 (see **Ream Naval Base**, below); 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 to Cambodia due to human rights concerns. Since 2018, the U.S. government has sanctioned five Cambodian officials 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).

Ream Naval Base

In 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on a secret agreement between China and Cambodia allowing the PRC exclusive military access to Ream Naval Base on the Gulf of Thailand. As reported by the *Washington Post* and other sources, China has begun upgrades at the port, and a PRC official confirmed that “a portion of the base” would be used by the Chinese military, although he and Cambodian officials denied that it was for exclusive use by China's People's Liberation Army. Cambodian officials have emphasized that a foreign military base would violate the kingdom's constitution. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a meeting with Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, “further reiterated U.S. concerns about how [China's] construction of military facilities at Ream Naval Base could negatively affect regional security.”

For further information, see CRS Report R44037, *Cambodia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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