

1960

**1960s**

Communist Party opposition to the regime of Prince Sihanouk grows. An unfolding civil war will kill 250,000 Cambodians by 1975.

**1970**

Prince Sihanouk is ousted in a coup d'état by right-wing general Lon Nol.

**1975**

With support from Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge defeat Lon Nol's army and seize power.

**1975**

Envisioning an agrarian communist utopia, the Khmer Rouge begin a genocide that will kill 1.2 to 2.8 million people in four years.

**1979**

Vietnam invades, ending the Khmer Rouge regime, but civil war with the Western- and China-backed Khmer Rouge coalition lasts for 20 years, killing over 86,000.

**1998**

The Khmer Rouge collapse, and armed conflict ends.

**1998**

Hun Sen's CPP wins national elections. Hun Sen will serve as prime minister continuously to the present day.

**2013**

The CPP narrowly wins elections amid widespread irregularities. The opposition CNRP rejects the results and boycotts parliament as protests break out, beginning a yearlong political crisis.

**2014**

Security forces open fire on antigovernment protesters and striking workers. The government bans public demonstrations.

**2014**

After further violent clashes, the CNRP ends its yearlong boycott of parliament in exchange for electoral reform.

**2015**

Amid deteriorating political conditions, an arrest warrant is issued for CNRP leader Sam Rainsy, who remains in self-imposed exile.

**2017**

A new law forces Rainsy to resign from the CNRP. The CNRP elects Kem Sokha as its new president who was subsequently arrested, accused of treason.

2017

# Cambodia

## At a glance



National civil war  
**Absent**



Communal/ideological conflict  
**Low**



National political conflict  
**Medium**



Local political and electoral conflict  
**Decreasing from medium to low but with potential to rise**



Transnational terrorism  
**Absent**



Local resource conflict  
**High**



Separatism and autonomy  
**Absent**



Urban crime and violence  
**Medium**

*\* Rankings are based on the last 15 years and are relative to other Asian countries.*

## Overview

Despite improved levels of development since the 1990s, Cambodia today is characterized by rising political tensions and deepening social divisions, a result of the historical legacy of past civil wars, the Khmer Rouge regime, and economic challenges in the globalized world. Following the 2013 National Assembly elections, six months of antigovernment protests took place. For a year, the opposition party boycotted parliament, claiming victory. Tensions between the ruling and opposition parties are again on the rise, as national elections approach in 2018. There are allegations that the government is stepping up its efforts to suppress the opposition, targeting its members and supporters as well as human rights defenders, social activists, and political commentators on the basis of their real or perceived political opposition to the government and its leader. Historically, attacks against ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia have been exacerbated by political conflict. The opposition party continues to use racially charged rhetoric against the ethnic Vietnamese as a populist strategy, which also aims to undermine the ruling party's legitimacy to hold power. Cambodia faces mounting labor and land conflicts as the country aims to increase exports and exploit its natural resources for economic development. The country lacks accurate statistics on crime, due to widespread corruption and people's mistrust of authorities. Cases of gender-based violence are common. A culture of impunity prevails due to weak rule of law, a dysfunctional judicial system, and a political system that is dependent on a monopoly of power within the executive. In a country dominated by a single party and still suffering from the traumas of genocide, citizens are understandably reluctant to constructively engage their government, but with a maturing "youth bulge" this may be changing.



#### National civil war

Cambodia has experienced the turmoil of civil war, genocide, and prolonged conflict in recent decades. Cambodia's civil war (1967–1975) led to an estimated 250,000 deaths.<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s, several groups in the opposition Communist Party started to oppose Prince Sihanouk's regime, and the prince was ousted in 1970 in a coup d'état by right-wing military leaders. A new authoritarian leadership under General Lon Nol was backed by the United States and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Sihanouk and his followers joined forces with the Communist Party of Kampuchea, the Khmer Rouge, and attacked Lon Nol's army. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge won the civil war and gained power.

During the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), Cambodia experienced one of the worst mass killings of the twentieth century. The Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, envisioned an agrarian communist utopia, turning the country into an organization of farms with citizens as laborers. All civil rights and liberties were immediately suspended, leading to severe repression. The genocide began with ethnic and religious minorities such as Chinese, Vietnamese, Thais, Christians, and Muslims. Everyone was forced to leave the cities, including the sick, the elderly, and children. People who were too slow or refused to leave were killed on the spot. The Khmer Rouge also eliminated anyone who could threaten their rule, especially intellectuals, such as teachers, doctors, lawyers, monks, and members of opposition groups, because they had the intelligence to question authority and could possibly overthrow the regime. Estimates of fatalities during the Khmer Rouge regime vary, but between 1.2 and 2.8 million people were killed or died from starvation or disease between 1975 and 1979.<sup>2</sup> Today, former members of the Khmer Rouge are on trial for crimes against humanity.

The Khmer Rouge regime ended when Vietnam invaded Phnom Penh, triggering another civil war, of 20 years, between a new Cambodian government, backed by the Vietnamese army, and an antigovernment coalition led by the Khmer Rouge. The invasion was precipitated by a

**1.2–2.8**  
**million people**  
**died under the**  
**Khmer Rouge regime**

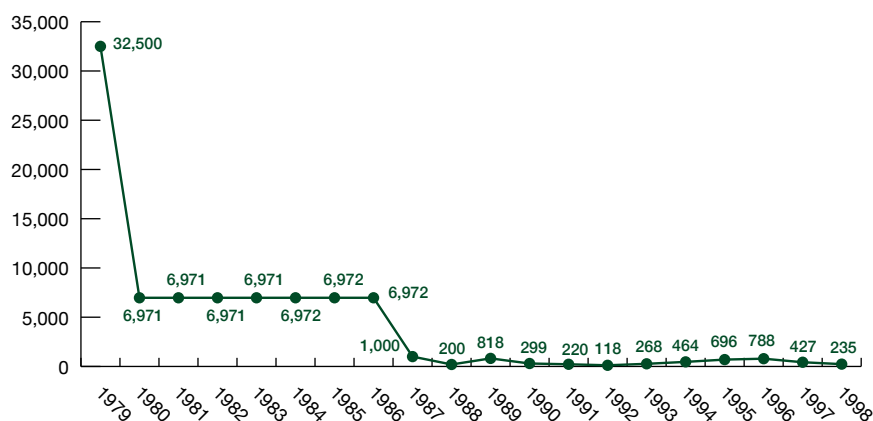
border conflict, from 1975 to 1977, between Democratic Kampuchea (the name of the Khmer Rouge-controlled state) and Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge started an armed resistance, forming an antigovernment alliance, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, with two noncommunist groups: the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF), under the leadership of Son Sann, and the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), led by Sihanouk. Western countries and China supported the antigovernment alliance in an attempt to limit Soviet and Vietnamese influence in the region. Despite a 1991 peace agreement, the conflict continued until 1998. After the Cold War ended, Vietnam withdrew its forces from Cambodia, and foreign support to the warring parties decreased substantially. In 1998, the Khmer Rouge collapsed, and armed conflict came to an end. The conflict caused over 86,000 deaths between 1979 and 1998 (figure 1). As part of its strategy of guerrilla warfare, the Khmer Rouge targeted the civilian population, resulting in at least 661 deaths.<sup>3</sup>



### National political conflict

National Assembly elections in 2013 marked two decades of peacebuilding in Cambodia since elections were held under UN supervision in 1993. The Cambodia People’s Party (CPP), led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, has controlled the government since the 1998 National Assembly elections. As shown in figure 2, political violence at the time of national elections significantly declined during the second decade of peacebuilding. However, the political process continues to be volatile. The opposition believes that the ruling CPP will not give up power, and Cambodia arguably does not have the conditions in place for any peaceful transition of power. This exacerbates the already difficult and complicated postconflict reconciliation process.

The 2013 elections indicated the growing polarization of Cambodian politics. Despite a high number of election irregularities detected by domestic and international observers, the 2013 elections were held peacefully, with the ruling CPP claiming victory, winning 68 seats in the National Assembly, but coming within four percentage points of losing the popular vote. The



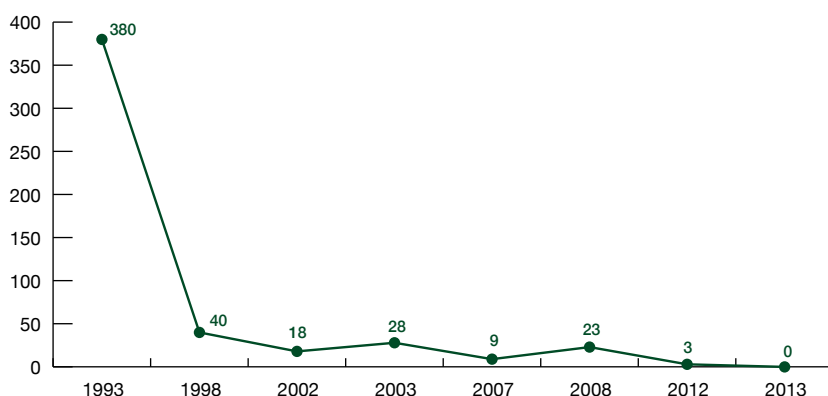
**Figure 1.** Estimate of battle deaths in Cambodia (1979–1998)

Source: Prepared based on estimates provided by “PRIO Battle Deaths v. 3.0”<sup>4</sup> for the period between 1979 and 1988 and “UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset v. 5”<sup>5</sup> for the period between 1989 and 1998.

opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) rejected the election results, calling for an independent and credible investigation into allegations of widespread irregularities. The CNRP refused to participate in parliament after the elections and organized a series of protests. Even though most of the protests were carried out peacefully, some turned into violent clashes with government security forces, who used excessive force to suppress unrest, resulting in at least six deaths and many injuries.<sup>6</sup> The Municipal Police reported 445 protests in Phnom Penh during the yearlong political crisis following the 2013 election, costing the country over USD 72 million in public and private property damage and loss of business investments.<sup>7</sup>

Multiple labor strikes and demonstrations to demand higher wages have also contributed to the antigovernment protests. For example, in early January 2014, strikes co-organized by garment workers and opposition supporters turned deadly, as security forces opened fire and killed five people.<sup>8</sup> Following the violent strikes, the Ministry of Interior announced an indefinite ban on public demonstrations, and Freedom Park, a legally designated area for demonstrations, was shut down in April. After a couple of violent clashes in July 2014, the CNRP finally agreed to end its yearlong boycott of parliament in exchange for electoral reform, ending the political crisis.

Since the truce, the political situation in Cambodia has deteriorated. As tensions between the ruling and opposition parties escalate ahead of the upcoming local and national elections scheduled for 2017 and 2018, respectively, politically motivated prosecutions of the opposition appear to have increased.<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International reported that at least 16 CNRP activists and officials remained in prison during 2016, while at least two CNRP members were held in pretrial detention and at least 13 had charges pending against them.<sup>10</sup> Those in prison included 14 CNRP members and activists who were convicted of leading or participating in a violent “insurrection” in July 2014, demanding the reopening of Freedom Park.<sup>11</sup> In November 2015, an arrest warrant was issued for the opposition president, Sam Rainsy, to belatedly enforce a judicial ruling from March 2013 that sentenced him to two years in jail.<sup>12</sup> Throughout 2016, he remained in self-imposed exile in France as he faced additional new charges against him. In February 2017, Rainsy resigned from the CNRP in response to the government’s effort to pass a new law that could be used to dissolve political parties whose members are convicted of criminal offenses. Following Rainsy’s resignation, the parliament amended the law on political parties to stop anyone convicted of an offence from running for office and to ban political party activities that were deemed to incite or promote “secession,” or that could otherwise harm



**Figure 2.** Killings of political activists and party members in Cambodia (1993–2013)

Source: COMFREL<sup>13</sup>

national security. The CNRP elected Kem Sokha, the former vice-chairman of the National Assembly,<sup>14</sup> as a new president. Sokha was also sentenced to five months in prison after refusing to appear as a witness in the prosecution of two CNRP members, but was pardoned by the king in December 2016. In September 2017, Cambodia's parliament voted to prosecute Sokha for treason, accusing him of plotting a plan with the United States to topple the government.<sup>15</sup> The US issued a statement doubting the Cambodian government's ability to organize credible national elections in 2018.<sup>16</sup>

The CPP-led government is also allegedly cracking down on human rights defenders, social activists, union workers, and antigovernment critics, who are deemed to undermine the government. Since 2015, a series of repressive laws has been enacted, including the Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO), the Trade Union Law, and the Telecommunication Law. The LANGO allows the authorities to deny nongovernmental organizations registration and shut them down, while the Trade Union Law imposes new restrictions on the right to freedom of association. The Telecommunication Law gives authorities powers to order telecommunications operators to monitor and record telecommunications activities, and to imprison people for using telecommunications in a manner deemed to threaten "national security." Human rights defenders as well as civil society organizations are subjected to notorious judicial harassment. For example, four senior members of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), and Ny Chakrya, a former ADHOC staffer and deputy secretary general of the National Election Committee, were detained in April 2016.<sup>17</sup> The case was related to advice and material support provided by ADHOC to a woman alleged to have had an extramarital relationship with Kem Sokha. Following their arrest, civil society launched a "Black Monday" campaign in May 2016 to call for their release. The authorities attempted to ban the protests and arrested and detained participants. In August 2017, the government closed the US-funded NGO, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), because of alleged failure to comply with legal duties. The organization was accused of planning to support the opposition in the 2018 election. NDI argued it was non-partisan and had fulfilled all legal obligations for registration.<sup>18</sup>



### Transnational terrorism

There are no reports of transnational terrorists operating in Cambodia.

## Subnational level

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### Separatism and autonomy

There is no conflict or violence related to separatism and autonomy at the subnational level in Cambodia.



### Large-scale communal and ideological conflicts

Ethnic Vietnamese<sup>19</sup> are often targeted for harassment and communal violence in the country. Most of them live as fishermen in the Tonle Sap River and Lake region. They are vulnerable because the constitution grants political rights and civil liberties only to Khmer citizens. Even though many have lived in Cambodia for several generations, Cambodian authorities regard them as immigrants or foreign residents unless they have documents that can prove their Cambodian citizenship. The Minority Rights Organization (MIRO) reports that some ethnic Vietnamese are stateless, as they do not hold either Cambodian or Vietnamese identity cards.<sup>20</sup> They are often trapped in poverty and face widespread discrimination and exploitation,

including a lack of access to education, healthcare, the justice system, social security, housing, land ownership, and voting. The issue of Vietnamese marginalization is often ignored by the domestic and international communities.

The ethnic Vietnamese have been the target of xenophobic attacks by political parties since the 1990s. Attacks have been exacerbated by the political conflict in the past two decades, which has created further animosity and intolerance towards them. The opposition party has long been accused of using racially charged rhetoric against ethnic Vietnamese, and pledging to deport Vietnamese immigrants, to gain support from Khmer voters. On the other hand, the CPP-led government announced in August 2016 that it would offer a path to legal residency for the majority of 160,000 immigrants, mainly Vietnamese, living in the country without proper documentation.<sup>21</sup>

Anti-Vietnamese harassment and attacks occur more frequently when political tensions are high in the run-up to and the aftermath of elections. One of Cambodia’s leading human rights organizations, the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), reports that election observers have witnessed crowds preventing ethnic Vietnamese from voting.<sup>22</sup> The United Nations special rapporteur on human rights also noted that ethnic Vietnamese were physically prevented from casting their votes in Sa Ang District, Troeuy Sla Commune, in Kandal Province.<sup>23</sup>

## Local level



### Local political conflict and electoral violence

The political atmosphere was less unstable during the 2012 commune elections than during elections in 2002 and 2007. COMFREL reported three cases of murder and 39 cases of threats or intimidation in 2012. The activists who were killed belonged to opposition political parties. The number of violent cases decreased significantly compared to previous commune elections (table 1). Commune elections held in June 2017, saw escalating political tensions between the ruling and opposition parties but little reported violence.

**Table 1.** Violent incidents during the commune elections in Cambodia (2002–2012)

	2002	2007	2012
Political activists killed	18	9	3
Incidents of serious violence, intimidation, and threats	138	127	39

Source: COMFREL<sup>24</sup>



### Local conflict over resources and community rights

Conflict over land and forests has emerged in recent years as the government seeks to increase exports and exploit its natural resources for national development. Global demand for land, accompanied by rapid economic expansion, has made the poor more vulnerable by reducing the security of land tenure, despite the government’s efforts to provide legal guarantees. Cambodia’s economic land concession (ELC) scheme leases large plots of state land (up to 10,000 hectares) to private investors for industrial and agricultural



# 10,000+

## families involved in land disputes in 2014

development. Over three million hectares of land, approximately 16.6 percent of the total land in the country, has been granted through ELCs to foreign and domestic companies and to wealthy political elites.<sup>25</sup> Communities living on the land are often forcibly evicted and involuntarily resettled or relocated, with little planning or respect for due process of law and basic human rights. Media often report villagers losing their land despite legal protections under the 2001 Land Law. Indigenous communities and ethnic minorities are particularly affected, losing access to their traditional lands and forests. Awarding private land titles rather than communal or collective ones is eroding traditional practices and beliefs.

Due to concerns raised by local and international communities about the negative impact of ELCs on communities and the environment, in May 2012 the government suspended granting new ELCs and called for a review of existing concessions. After the review, 24 concessions were revoked or reduced in size by a total of 202,210 hectares in 11 provinces.<sup>26</sup> However, economically and politically influential private investors continue to grab land from impoverished residents and cultivators. Villagers have become more confrontational, and security forces have increasingly used force against them. Evictions have sometimes been carried out with excessive force.

Ambiguous land policies and weak implementation of laws due to corruption and a lack of political will have increased land disputes between citizens and land concessionaires. The human rights organization LICADHO estimates that more than half a million people were affected by land conflict between January 2000 and March 2014.<sup>27</sup> These conflicts are widely distributed across the country and cases have increased sharply over the past 13 years. In 2014 alone, the organization recorded land disputes involving 10,625 families.<sup>28</sup> This is a substantial jump from 3,475 families in 2013 and 5,672 families in 2012.<sup>29</sup> Land disputes can lead to violent confrontations because the judicial system fails to provide fair and prompt resolutions. After the LANGO came into effect in August 2015, land activists and representatives of affected communities were arrested and imprisoned on fraudulent criminal charges.<sup>30</sup>



### Urban crime and violence

Cambodia's population is still largely rural, with only around 20 percent of the population living in urban areas.<sup>31</sup> Urbanization has occurred very slowly, with an annual growth rate of 3.7 percent.<sup>32</sup> According to an Asian Development Bank survey of urban violence in public spaces, the most common form of crime and violence in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, is robbery (32 percent), followed by the snatching of valuables (23 percent) and fighting (22 percent).<sup>33</sup> Robbery was significantly higher in Phnom Penh than in other



# 1 in 5 women experience

## intimate partner violence in their lifetime

provinces. Phnom Penh had an average rate of 33.2 cases per 100,000 people over seven years (1996–1999 and 2001, 2003, and 2005), but the rate declined to 14.8 per 100,000 in 2006.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, statistics show that homicide rates tend to be higher in many rural areas than in the capital.<sup>35</sup> Figures for Cambodia’s homicide rates in urban areas are not readily available, while the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports the homicide rate in the country overall as 6.5 per 100,000 people in 2012.<sup>36</sup> Due to widespread corruption and mistrust of authorities, the United Nations International Crime Victim Survey (UNICVS) has found that most victims of crime in Cambodia do not report their cases to the police.<sup>37</sup>



### Domestic and gender-based violence

Violence against women is culturally entrenched in Cambodian society. It is rooted in norms, practices, and attitudes that denigrate women’s roles and contributions to society. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is widespread in the country but underreported. The National Survey on Women’s Health and Life Experiences, conducted by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and the National Institute of Statistics, reports that approximately one in five women in Cambodia aged 15–64 has experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime.<sup>38</sup> Emotional abuse is the most common form of IPV (32 percent), followed by controlling behavior (30 percent).<sup>39</sup> The survey also reveals that women in rural areas are more likely to experience IPV than urban women.<sup>40</sup> Nearly 60 percent of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence condone wife beating under certain circumstances, such as unfaithfulness or neglecting the children.<sup>41</sup> A multicountry UN study also reports that Cambodian women hold more conservative or gender-inequitable views than men. Over two-thirds of women responded that they should tolerate violence in order to maintain the family, compared to 60 percent of men.<sup>42</sup> Deeply entrenched and unequal gender relations, underpinned by male domination and control, continue to shape the attitudes of many men and women towards the use and acceptance of violence.

Rape is a grave and widespread problem in Cambodia. Young women and children are particularly affected by this crime. In an investigation of over 1,000 rape cases between 2012 and 2015, the local human rights organization LICADHO found that over 70 percent of victims were under the age of 18, most of them female.<sup>43</sup> Perpetrators of rape also start very young. According

to the multicountry UN study, 15.8 percent of male respondents in Cambodia admitted to having committed rape before they were 15.<sup>44</sup> Another notable finding of the UN study was that gang rape is reported as the most common form of nonpartner rape in Cambodia. The true magnitude of rape is unknown, as only a fraction of cases are reported to the authorities. Amnesty International's in-depth study of sexual violence in Cambodia confirms that victims often choose not to report, or delay reporting, because of fear of the perpetrators, fear of being blamed by their parents and family, social stigma, and mistrust of the authorities and the legal system.<sup>45</sup> Even if they decide to report, rape cases are often dealt with in extralegal, out-of-court agreements between a victim and a perpetrator in which the rapist pays a sum of money to the victim and the police or the court staff take a cut.

Another major concern is human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of Cambodian men, women, and children. Poverty and lack of opportunities push vulnerable populations to seek employment overseas in nations such as Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea, Japan, Kuwait, and Qatar. Labor migration has risen dramatically in recent years: between 2004 and 2011, the number of registered Cambodian migrants increased by 272 percent.<sup>46</sup> Undocumented migrant workers in particular are subjected to sex trafficking, domestic servitude, debt bondage, or forced labor in the fishery and agricultural sector as well as in factories. Internal trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation is also a serious concern. Cambodia is a destination country for women and children who are trafficked from neighboring countries, mainly from Vietnam. Children under the age of 15 are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and the sale of virgin women and girls continues to be a problem in Cambodia. Poverty, lack of education, lack of legal protection, and low levels of awareness about risky labor migration leave many Cambodians vulnerable to human trafficking.

## Notes

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