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Opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party president Sam Rainsy and his deputy Kem Sokha are mobbed by supporters as they drive from the airport to Freedom Park after Rainsy returned from self-exile on Friday. VIREAK MAI

Unprecedented turnout greets Rainsy

Fri, 19 July 2013 Abby Seiff and Cheang Sokha

Over the course of 10 kilometres and three hours this morning, one could be forgiven for forgetting what country they were in.

A sea of supporters likely numbering more than 100,000 turned out to greet opposition leader Sam Rainsy, who touched down in Phnom Penh at 9:05am to a hero's welcome following nearly four years of self-exile.

Slideshow of Rainsy's return

Supporters thronged the entire route from Phnom Penh International Airport to Freedom Park, slowing the convoy to a crawl as adulatory crowds swarmed around the cars carrying the opposition leader – arm-in-arm with Cambodia National Rescue Party deputy president Kem Sokha - and his retinue.

Just one week after he was granted a royal pardon, Rainsy descended from the plane with Sokha in tow, stepped onto the tarmac, and kissed the ground.

As the pair drove out of the gates, and a planned press conference disintegrated amid the chaos, Rainsy grabbed a microphone and shouted above the din of the crowd.

"I am so excited to see all of you. I am so happy, so excited to meet all my compatriots. Thank you, all of you. We are now walking together," Rainsy told the overjoyed supporters. "I came this time to rescue the nation with all of you."

While the amnesty pardoned Rainsy from 11 years in prison, for convictions on a raft of defamation and forgery charges widely believed to be politically motivated, it included no stipulations about his eligibility to run.

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His name has been stricken from both the voter list and candidate list in adherence with rules forbidding convicted persons to run, and the National Election Committee has stood firm that they cannot legally re-list Rainsy unless the laws are amended.

Regardless, if the crowds that turned out are any indication, it is clear that the return will provide a massive boost for the beleaguered party.

"I love him. I want him to be the [prime minister] of Cambodia. I want to change the [Prime Minister] and we needed him to come back," said Un Charin. The 28-year-old motodop had come to the airport hours before Rainsy was set to arrive, 20 friends in tow.

"I studied in a university in Battambang for two years, but I can't find a good job. I wanted to work in a company, but you have to pay money just to get a job. It's time for a change," he said, before bursting into chant of b'do, or change.

As the trucks slowly made their way toward Freedom Park, supporters – some of whom had been camped out since dawn – let out enormous cheers. Whole companies trickled out of their offices, the employees standing in neat lines, snapping photos with iPads and holding up homemade signs.

Near a factory, dozens of garment workers pressed against the barrier dividing the north and southbound lanes of Russian Boulevard.

"I missed lunch time, but that's okay with me, I wanted to see His Excellency Sam Rainsy," said 20-year-old Sreymom, a CNRP sticker plastered to her cheek. While the government has been touting its recent increase of the minimum wage in the garment sector, workers, she said, were more impressed by the CNRP's promise of \$150 a month minimum.

"I support the CNRP," she said.

That sentiment is not limited to those in the garment industry.

Le Hour, a civil servant employed by the Ministry of Education, said Rainsy was the clear choice.

"He has a high knowledge of economic matters and enough stability to run our country. No corruption, no evictions," he said.

"I'm a member of the CPP inside the ministry, but I don't support the CPP's policies. Many people [secretly] don't support them, because they have too low a salary."

Along the parade route, that appeared to be borne out.

As the cars slid by the Por Sen Chey district office of Education, Youth and Sports, officials leaned over the second-story balcony to watch the show. On the far end, metres away from their CPP-polo clad colleagues, a pair of well-dressed civil servants flashed the number 7.

A 30-year-old monk from Wat Stung Meanchey shouted "change!" before turning to speak to a reporter.

"I am happy to be able to come here and welcome our leader; he is brave and inspirational for the people. He is a man who truly loves his nation," said venerable Chhit Sovann.

"I strongly hope that the CNRP will win this election, that people will get back their land and that our land at the border lost to the neighbouring country will also be taken back."

In the car following Rainsy's, Cambodians who had flocked in from the US and France to help the party during the campaign said they had little doubt the CNRP would win, should elections be free and fair.

"I'm strongly hoping we're going to win and we're going to change the

country,” said Sovin David, a party member who has spent the past 18 years in France. “If they win, I’m not going back.”

“It’s been almost 30 years... Now it’s time for real democracy. Bring back Sam Rainsy!”

While the Ministry of Interior promised hundreds of officers to secure Rainsy’s return, few were present past the gates of the airport, leaving the task of keeping order to perhaps thousands of volunteers.

Young men and women, arms linked in daisy chains, surrounded his pickup truck, keeping back surging crowds, while a contingent of private bodyguards kept watch from inside the truck bed.

Despite the lack of a visible surplus of officers, the daylong demonstration remained peaceful throughout, with just a single minor reported incident over the course of the entire day.

Even a handful of CPP supporters who braved the crowds were met with no more than the occasional verbal jeers.

Also notably absent from the parade were local media. As dozens of Cambodian and foreign journalists scrambled up and down Russian Boulevard, racing to rooftops for the best shot and hopping on and off trucks, broadcasters were nowhere to be seen.

The television channels – all of them dominated by government ties – showed no footage of the rally, while other media downplayed it. Local news site CEN, one of the chief breaking news outlets, numbered the crowd in the thousands.

Taking note of the absence, a wry supporter walked the length of the route toting a homemade, Styrofoam camera. Coated with CNRP logos, the camera sported the letters TVK - the name of the state broadcaster.

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