

Cambodia opposition leader seeks Japan role in fair election

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Cambodia's self-exiled opposition leader has urged Japan, his nation's biggest donor, to use its leverage to convince his nation's autocratic government to ensure that July elections are democratic.

Sam Rainsy, whose Cambodia National Rescue Party has been banned, said he's hopeful Japan and its business community can send a message to Prime Minister Hun Sen that he needs to restore democracy or face isolation.

Sam Rainsy was in Tokyo to meet with Japanese business and political officials to seek support for his return amid growing democratic setbacks ahead of the July 29 polls.

"Japan has strong leverage to help restore the democratic process," he told reporters in Tokyo. The U.S. and European nations have suspended financial support for the upcoming elections and Japan is the only western bloc nation that maintains a good relationship with the Hun Sen regime, he said. "If Japan withdraws, Hun Sen will be totally isolated and Cambodia will be really in trouble."

Hun Sen has held power for more than three decades and declared his intention to remain for at least two more five-year



FAIR ELECTION. Cambodia's self-exiled opposition leader, Sam Rainsy, speaks during a press conference in Tokyo. Rainsy, whose Cambodia National Rescue Party has been banned, said he's hopeful Japan and its business community can send a message to Prime Minister Hun Sen that he needs to restore democracy or face isolation. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

Sam Rainsy has urged a boycott of the vote under current conditions.

He has been in self-exile since late 2015 to avoid imprisonment in a defamation case, and was convicted again in December in connection with a Facebook comment about Hun Sen.

Sam Rainsy's party was dissolved in November by a court order after the government filed a complaint alleging it was involved in treasonous activities. All of its lawmakers were tossed out of parliament and party leaders have been subject to legal harassment.

Sam Rainsy said he is still "hopeful" of a democratic election. "(If) the opposition will not be able to participate, then what can be predicted? It can be an eruption of violence," he cautioned.

Tokyo in February announced an 800 million yen (\$7.6 million) grant to Cambodia that includes Japanese-made ballot boxes and other election-related equipment for the July polls, adding to the 12,000 ballot boxes that Japan donated for the 1998 elections.

terms.

Japan, which has contributed to Cambodia's peace-building and reconstruction, is seen as having responded somewhat mildly to the government's crackdown on the media and persecution of opposition politicians.

Japanese foreign minister Taro Kono urged Cambodia to hold free and fair elections but didn't comment on the government's actions against its political opponents during talks with Hun Sen in Phnom Penh.

But Sam Rainsy says he believes

Japan's quieter response is because it is mindful of Asian culture, in which people try to avoid causing others to lose face, and therefore is taking a more discreet, softer approach.

He said Japanese companies doing business with Cambodia are concerned about its volatile situation.

"So it is detrimental to the economic situation. We need sustainable development and we need Japanese investors. But Japanese investors are reluctant now that they cannot invest in such an environment."





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