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Cambodia Demo of Death

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ITS rubber-stamp parliament has brought little credit to Cambodia's four-year experiment with democracy, but a grenade attack outside parliament's gates on March 30th underlined the danger of democracy's demise.

The country's political leaders have recently, after months of bickering, agreed to hold local and parliamentary elections this year and in November 1998. But the latest example of political violence raises doubts about holding a credible poll.

The attackers outside parliament intended to kill Sam Rainsy, an outspoken opposition leader, who was leading a demonstration. Four grenades killed at least 16 people and injured around 150. Mr Rainsy, with some justice, feels it is a miracle he survived. A bodyguard shielded him from the first grenade and died. As the second grenade exploded, Mr Rainsy crawled away, saving himself from the third and fourth.

prime minister, Hun Sen, and his Cambodian People's Party. It is difficult to find anyone outside the party who disagrees. Mr Hun Sen says Mr Rainsy is responsible for the deaths by holding a demonstration and has called for his arrest.

Those who criticise Mr Hun Sen do so at their peril. Five journalists have been murdered in the past three years. Opposition party members who ignored his warning not to hold a congress in 1995 suffered a grenade attack, causing deaths and injury. Even if Mr Hun Sen did not order such attacks, his harsh rhetoric creates an atmosphere conducive to violence. Mr Rainsy, a former finance minister turned government scourge, presented an obvious target. He depicts Mr Hun Sen as little better than a mafia chief.

Some members of Mr Hun Sen's party Mr Rainsy claimed that his assassination was ordered by Cambodia's second

clearly object to his confrontational style of leadership, although party insiders dismiss speculation that he is isolated and losing influence. However, his always fraught relations with the first prime minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, and the royalist FUNCINPEC party, have sunk to open antagonism, leading even to armed clashes between their followers. The prince's father, King Norodom Sihanouk, has threatened abdication. By becoming a "commoner" and throwing his popular appeal behind FUNCINPEC, he could gravely damage Mr Hun Sen's chances at the elections.

Prince Ranariddh and Mr Hun Sen have set up a joint investigation into the killings, but the prince also wants an independent inquiry. He says he fears more attacks will occur. Few doubt that Mr Rainsy remains at risk.