



Quarterly Report
CAMBODIA: INCREASING CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT AND AWARENESS
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I. SUMMARY

On February 3, 2002, Cambodia held elections for councils in 1,621 communes across the country. As the first local polls since the 1991 United Nations-sponsored peace plan, commune elections were widely viewed as an important step toward decentralizing power and increasing political competition throughout the nation. With the newly elected commune councilors poised to take office, Cambodian citizens still face the important challenge of overcoming a limited experience in working through democratic institutions, including civil society organizations, political parties and elected government bodies. As such, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs' (NDI) current programming in Cambodia has three primary components: (1) to monitor the electoral and political process surrounding the commune elections; (2) to strengthen citizen participation at the local level; and (3) to provide assistance to Cambodian NGOs seeking to enter into the dialogue on reforming the military.

During the commune election period, NDI continued to provide regular assistance to the three leading election monitoring organizations (EMOs) and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as they issued regular reports on the pre- and post-election environment and observed the commune elections. In addition, NDI partnered with the Khmer Institute for Democracy (KID) to organize Cambodia's first candidate debates. Following the elections, NDI prepared and published a comprehensive report detailing the commune council election process in its entirety; this report was subsequently distributed to a wide audience in both the United States and Cambodia.

In late February, NDI began to transition away from its focus on the elections to engage in the design and strategy for a civic education and advocacy program, which comprises the largest component of the Institute's current USAID grant. NDI also continued to provide financial and technical assistance to the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) in its year-long program to raise public discussion on and civic participation in the military reform process. As such, the Institute has been

successful in assisting Cambodian NGOs with developing innovative and thoroughly conceived activities, strategies, materials and reports, resulting in the sharing of valuable experience and strengthening civil society's role in the political process.

II. BACKGROUND

On February 3, 2002, Cambodia held elections for councils in 1,621 communes across the country. As the first local polls since the 1991 United Nations-sponsored peace plan, commune elections were widely viewed as an important step toward decentralizing power and increasing political competition throughout the nation. Because the elections were proportional and party-based, the system ensured that the overwhelming majority of commune councils would have representation from more than one party. While the process by definition broke the CPP stranglehold on commune government, the results of the election showed that the ruling party maintained control of the commune chief positions in 1,598, or almost 99 percent of all communes.

The commune elections followed two previous national polls, held in 1993 and 1998. The UN-organized 1993 elections, largely hailed as a success at the time, resulted in a fragile coalition government that was overthrown by the Hun Sen-led CPP in 1997. In 1998, a prevailing climate of impunity for violence directed at opposition candidates and activists, the lack of impartiality of election authorities and unequal access to media were among the concerns expressed by domestic and international observers. Each of these issues arose again during the commune election process. Furthermore, significant challenges lie ahead. While commune councilors are now elected officials, the legal framework governing commune administration and the reality of the Cambodian political system also presents severe limitations on the ability of the newly elected councils to act as genuinely representative bodies.

Since December 1999, NDI has worked with civil society leaders, including representatives of the three Cambodian election monitoring organizations, to put together recommendations for improving both the drafting process and the content of the commune administration and election laws, and to develop and implement an advocacy campaign based on these recommendations. Following the final passage of the laws in March 2001, NDI encouraged Cambodian NGOs to shift their focus to voter education and other election related activities. NDI provided technical assistance to Cambodian EMOs and NGOs as they monitored and published regular statements on every stage of the election process. In addition, in December 2001, NDI, in partnership with the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) co-hosted a national conference on civil-military relations in Cambodia, bringing together leaders from civil society, the Cambodian government, the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and the international community to address key issues such as demobilization and the role of civil society in military reform.

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Election and Political Monitoring

During the 15-day campaign period in January, NDI collaborated with the Khmer Institute for Democracy (KID) to co-host six candidate debates around the country. Candidate debates presented a critical and innovative opportunity to facilitate direct interaction between candidates and the public, while also shifting the focus of commune elections away from national political party platforms and to local issues and candidates' own plans for their communities. NDI and KID made an effort to select sites that would enable the participation of all political parties, including smaller parties fielding candidates in a limited number of communes. On this basis, communes in Kampot, Svay Reing, Kampong Cham, Siem Reap and Phnom Penh were ultimately selected. Seven of the eight registered political parties, including all the major ones, agreed to participate. Party representatives took part in both the planning and implementation of the debates to ensure that they would be conducted fairly by taking a vested interest in resolving critical substantive issues, such as debate format, selecting locations and choosing an impartial moderator.

Prior to each debate, KID and NDI conducted a candidate debate training where the candidates received an overview on debate format and etiquette. Also, KID took the lead in organizing a community discussion in each location where 40 citizens identified and prioritized the primary concerns of their communities. These concerns then became the basis for the questions posed to the candidates during the debates. The structure of the debates followed a five-part format allowing for opening arguments, questions from the moderator, candidates asking questions of each other, questions from the audience and closing arguments.

As such, the debates provided an excellent opportunity for voters to hear their candidates' views on issues specific to each community. Local concerns, for example, ranged from finishing the roof on a local pagoda to eradicating corruption in the local administration to plans for installing sewage systems and paving roads. While many political leaders initially feared candidate debates would result in violence and inappropriate personal attacks, the debates progressed smoothly and the political parties engaged in constructive dialogue on the issues. Audience size ranged from 300 to 1,000, in one location.

Throughout the two-week long program, NDI also chartered a bus to transport national party leaders, NGO representatives and journalists to each of the debates. This was an essential step in allaying the fears of national party leaders and ensuring that the debates would be conducted fairly and equally. Representatives of the election monitoring organizations and politically-oriented NGOs, such as the Center for Social Development, took part in order to observe the debates and distribute voter education materials that had been compiled in association with NDI. The bus also offered local and international journalists the opportunity to be witness to and to report on each of the six

debates. This was critical as Cambodia's National Election Committee (NEC) banned the broadcast of the candidate debates on state run television.

During this quarter, NDI also consulted regularly with Cambodian EMOs and other NGOs engaged in monitoring the February 3, commune council elections. NDI worked closely with the EMOs to strengthen their ability to monitor and report on elections violations and irregularities. In particular, NDI worked with the EMOs to respond to the NEC's decision to ban the broadcast of a series of voter education roundtables that were to be aired during the campaign period.

Following the elections, NDI drafted and published a comprehensive report detailing the commune election process in its entirety, from the drafting of the legal framework through the post-election grievances and appeals period. While NDI did not field an official international observation delegation, its involvement in every stage of the election process offered a vantage point to record both the advances and shortcomings in the commune elections process. The Institute hopes that this report will be useful to international donors and NGOs, domestic civic organizations, political parties and government officials in Cambodia can steer away from the many flaws that have pervaded Cambodian elections and review systematically the myriad recommendations as they prepare for the upcoming 2003 national elections. Over 500 copies have been distributed in both the United States and Cambodia.

Citizen Education and Participation

Following the February 3 commune elections, NDI began to transition away from elections programs to focus on the design of the citizen education and advocacy component of its current programming. To facilitate this transition, Mary Margaret Dineen joined the NDI team in Cambodia for a three-month period to lend her expertise to developing a citizen participation program, based on her experience establishing a similar program for NDI in Albania. From February 25 to March 1, Dineen and Resident Senior Program Manager Eric Kessler were also joined in Phnom Penh by the resident director of NDI's office in Nepal to collaborate on initial brainstorming and strategy sessions. NDI is in the process of designing a civic advocacy program that will have a two-pronged approach. The focus will be to work on the provincial and communal levels with two target groups. One target group will be Cambodian NGOs that are currently involved in community based advocacy initiatives. The other target will be informal groups of citizens that have shown an interest in making changes in their communities through advocacy. Efforts will be made to work with the groups to use their issues and advocacy initiatives to influence the 2003 Parliamentary Election discussion and platforms.

NDI hosted the first meeting of a group of election-related NGOs seeking to advocate on the election law. The group, under COMFREL's leadership, selected five priority issues to focus on from a list of nine. They made a rough plan for a press conference and meetings with government officials and donors. NDI staff encouraged

the group to consider a more grassroots approach to their effort, one that would demonstrate widespread support for their very progressive reform recommendations.

Supporting Cambodian NGOs in Strengthening Civil-Military Relations

On January 14, the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) held a press conference to release their Policy Brief on civil-military relations issues that outlines the recommendations that emerged from the December 14, 2001 national conference sponsored by NDI. The press conference was well attended by both international and domestic media outlets.

This quarter, NDI worked with CICP to organize three (in a year-long series of nine) civil-military relations roundtables. The roundtables facilitated discussions on a variety of relevant civil-military topics among government officials, representatives of civil society organizations, military officials, journalists and students. The roundtables, like the December 2001 conference, sought to maximize the participation of civil society and the public, civil society leaders, government officials and members of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. Following each of the roundtable discussions, various recommendations were made to increase understanding between civil society and the Cambodian military.

NDI and CICP's first roundtable discussion, entitled, "Demobilization and Civil-Military Relations in Cambodia: Problems, Achievements and What Can Be Done?" was held on January 24, 2002 and sought to increase civil society and government support for improved living conditions and training for demobilized soldiers. The key speaker of the roundtable, Major General Meas Savorn, Deputy Director General and Director of Military and Civilian Affairs of the Ministry of National Defense, stressed the importance of retaining a sufficient number of defense personnel in the context of demobilization, strengthening the quality of the armed forces and strengthening the respect of human rights of demobilized soldiers.

On February 18, 2002, CICP and NDI co-hosted "Enhancing the Role of Parliament in Defense and Security: What Can the Parliament Do to Enhance Its Role in Defense and Promotion of Civil-Military Relations?", the second roundtable discussion in the series of workshops on civil-military relations. Speakers included Major General Mam Sophat, Director of the Department of Legislation of the Ministry of National Defense and Mr. Stephen Pak, Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute of Human Rights, emphasized the need for the courts and media to be independent and neutral in relation to the armed forces. Following the discussion, several recommendations were proposed on how parliament and lawmakers could expand their roles in the protection of defense and security issues.

The third roundtable organized by CICP, entitled "Challenges of Reintegrating Soldiers into Society—What Can Civil Society Do?" focused on civil society challenges in reintegrating demobilized soldiers into society. The March 20 workshop was widely attended and resulted in the formulation of eight recommendations, including how to

strengthen relations between NGOs and the Ministry of Defense, conduct an assessment of the needs of soldiers so NGOs can provide necessary services and undertake better follow-up on the location and services provided to demobilized soldiers.

NDI has also assisted CICP in launching a research component of the project, undertaking a more in-depth look at prospects for civil society's role in reforming the military. The research, which comprises the findings of the December 2001 national conference, roundtables and interviews conducted by the CICP in areas where demobilized soldiers reside, will be developed in a series of reports, including the first comprehensive study of civil-military relations in Cambodia. A draft of the first report in the series was completed during this quarter along with the translation of selected speeches from the national conference. CICP expects to have a revised draft available for publication by May.

IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Objective 1: Building on their experience in the 1998 general elections, Cambodian election monitoring coalitions strengthen their efforts to monitor commune elections in 2002 and develop suitable monitoring programs.

Cambodian EMOs have continued to advocate for the just implementation of the commune election and administration regulations. Their ongoing efforts have drawn the attention of the media, international donor community and members of the government to violations and irregularities in the various stages of the commune election process, including voter registration, candidate registration, the campaign period and election day polling. The groups remain open to suggestions from NDI as the Institute continues to work with Cambodian EMOs to strengthen their election monitoring networks while improving their reporting and monitoring skills. NDI will continue to work with them in an advocacy campaign targeting the development of the election framework for the 2003 national elections.

Objective 2: Cambodian citizens increase their understanding of democratic principles such as the rule of law, tolerance, free speech and assembly, and international human rights norms, and relate these principles to local governance.

The candidate debates provided an innovative opportunity for NDI to undertake a meaningful and innovative election program while gaining valuable commune level experience with bridging the relationship between elected commune councilors and commune citizens, which further facilitated the transition between the Institute's election monitoring and citizen participation components of the Institute's programming.

Before the candidate debates, Cambodian residents knew very little about the candidates running for office within their communes and even less about their stances on certain policy issues. Not only did the debates enable the candidates to introduce themselves to the public, but also to allow them to address issues pertinent to the

commune residents. A random sampling of audience members at each debate location revealed that they were surprised to have learned something about the actual candidates running for local office, rather than just the party leaders in Phnom Penh.

The candidate debates enabled candidates from different parties to establish an identity beyond the hazy platforms of their political parties and to further distinguish themselves from other political party members. This was apparent with the clear winner of the sixth and final candidate debate held in Phnom Penh. The victory of the female Sam Rainsy Party candidate at the debate resulted in her widespread recognition in the commune and her eventual election as the only female Commune Chief in all of Cambodia's 1,621 communes. Voice of America, Radio Free Asia and local press accredited the debate for her success at the polls. Following the first debate on January 19, the British Ambassador brought additional acclaim to the debates when he told a roomful of diplomats that the debate was the "best example of democracy he's ever seen in Cambodia."

While NDI was initially disappointed with audience turnout, which did not exceed 300 people in the first few locations, adopting different advertising techniques, such as distributing flyers in the communes, resulted in higher audience attendance. The candidate debates therefore provided Cambodians with an important opportunity to participate in local politics and engage their prospective leaders.

NDI will begin to institutionalize this momentum as it undertakes an extensive civic education and advocacy program in the coming months.

***Objective 3:** Cambodian efforts to strengthen civilian oversight of the military through consultations and financial assistance to local NGOs undertaking civil-military relations work are enhanced.*

As civil-military relations had not previously been accorded a role in discussions of demobilization and military reform in Cambodia, the monthly workshops organized by the CICIP largely succeeded in accomplishing their basic goal of making civil society organizations, the government and armed forces aware that civil society has an important role to play in the defense policymaking process. CICIP's extensive experience in organizing workshops and its ability to attract a high level audience contributed to raising the profile of this issue; at the same time, it was obvious that many representatives from all sectors lack a fundamental familiarity with and understanding of the theoretical and practical issues associated with the role of civil society in reforming the military. CICIP and NDI also continue to work together to determine the focus of additional workshops that will focus on specific aspects of civil-military reform. Large attendance and participation of critical government and civil society leaders at the CICIP organized workshops further indicates that significant interest has been generated in the civil-military relations program.

The January 14 press conference announcing the release of the CICIP's Policy Brief was widely attended by Khmer newspaper journalists as well as Reuters news

service, the Women's Media Center, and the Cambodia Daily. Timed to take place just prior to the January 16 Consultative Group meeting, NDI and CICP expected the reports of the press conference and the distribution of the policy brief to have an impact on the demobilization talks of the international donor community.

V. EVALUATION

At the national level, NDI's electoral reform work with election-related NGOs has proven difficult, as the majority of the organizations are not eager to engage in grassroots activities. NDI has evaluated its resources and determined that the Institute can be more effective targeting its assistance at those NGOs, such as NICFEC and women's rights organizations, that appear more interested in grassroots advocacy. This focus is a change from NDI's original strategy of working with a larger coalition of organizations. At the same time, through field visits and meetings with related organizations, NDI has identified many communities in the field that are already or likely to conduct grassroots advocacy on local issues, giving NDI optimism for a field-focused program that might have a direct impact on issues that may be a core part of an electoral advocacy program and a more long-term policy reform program.

The recent delays and rumored misappropriation of funds for the World Bank-sponsored military demobilization program has made NDI's civil-military program even more necessary. Since the civil-military component of the NDI's program was initiated in December, the Institute has seen an increase in NGO leaders interested in addressing and being involved in civil-military reform. The large attendance and participation of critical government and civil society leaders at the workshops reveals that there is a good deal of interest in the program. As part of the Institute's ongoing evaluative process, NDI is considering how the important message of civil society involvement in military reform can be furthered at a more rapid pace. Based on NDI's current analysis, there are many civil society-driven activities that can publicly push the message of transparency and accountability, in much the same way as USAID opened the debate on government corruption many years ago.

Although NDI does not yet have dedicated funding for work with political parties, opportunities continue to present themselves to assist reforms within the three largest parties. In evaluating requests from these groups for training on topics such as long-term party development, short-term campaign strategy development and skills training, it is becoming clear that political party programming is a priority direction for NDI's future work. Even without funding, NDI is considering making initial technical assistance available to these reforms as early as the upcoming quarter. The requests coming from these groups demonstrate an understanding of their own weaknesses, an eagerness to learn, and a desire to work with a multi-partisan institute such as NDI. We evaluate our past programming in this area, in years past with NED funding and more recently during the commune council candidate debate program, as having paved the way for NDI to have strong credibility with each of these parties.

VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

NDI will finish the design and strategy of its civic education and advocacy program and begin the implementation phase.

In late April, NDI will also co-host a conference with CICIP on the commune council elections. The purpose of the conference is to review past elections in Cambodia while setting an electoral reform agenda for the 2003 national elections and beyond. NDI believes that hosting a national conference that focuses on the advances and shortcomings of elections in Cambodia, going back to the 1993 elections organized by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, will shed light on important criteria for advancing democracy in Cambodia. Many international and domestic actors have already expressed interest in the conference and the Institute is expecting it to be widely attended by representatives of the international community as well as of the Cambodian government, civil society and political parties.

NDI will also continue to cooperate with CICIP to provide financial and technical assistance for the ongoing series of workshops on various aspects of civil-military relations.