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**Pre-Election Assessment Mission  
Kingdom of Cambodia  
January 24, 2003**

**IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED TO ENSURE  
CAMBODIANS ARE REGISTERED TO VOTE**

The International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted the first in its series of three pre-election assessment missions on January 19 to 24. The assessment mission was led by former US Ambassador John Malott, IRI Board Member and Corporation for Public Broadcasting Board Member Cheryl Halpern, and former US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senior Staff Member David Merkel (107<sup>th</sup> Congress).

Based on IRI's experience with elections around the world, we believe that the quality of an election depends upon all phases of the election, beginning with voter registration and extending through the tabulation and announcement of results. IRI hopes that these assessments will help Cambodian officials to eliminate many of the problems faced in past elections and to meet both international standards and the standards that it has set for itself in its own laws and in the statements of its leaders.

The IRI delegation met with His Majesty the King; the Prime Minister; the Minister of the Interior; the leader of Cambodia's parliamentary opposition; the Chairman of the National Election Committee (NEC); Secretaries General of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and of Funcinpec; and leaders of major election and human rights NGOs. IRI deployed a total of 14 credentialed election observers in five teams to Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, Phnom Penh and Siem Reap to observe voter registration, and to meet officials from political parties, commune councils, Provincial Election Secretariats, election monitoring and human rights NGOs, and with voters, including Buddhist monks.

In meetings with national leaders, IRI raised the problems that occurred in Cambodia's elections of 1998 and 2002 and sought information about this year's elections and the

steps being taken to ensure that these past problems do not reoccur. Among these problems were voter intimidation; violence against political activists; a lack of media access for independent and opposition groups; irregularities in election administration; suppression of voter registration and turnout; poor ballot security; and irregularities in the vote counting process.

The assessment team was grateful to receive the full support of Cambodia's three political parties represented in parliament for this assessment mission and for the wide range of work carried out by IRI in support of Cambodia's elections and democratic development.

## **Political Environment**

IRI's delegation found that Cambodia's political environment still is not truly free and that in many areas it is marked by a climate of fear and intimidation. In the year that has passed following commune elections in early 2002, more than ten Cambodian political activists have been murdered across the country in acts that appear to be politically motivated, according to Human Rights Watch and the UN Center for Human Rights. These murders have had a chilling effect on the ability of political activists to organize before elections and continue to discourage the participation of citizens in the political process.

IRI applauds recent statements and personal assurances by government officials, including those of the Prime Minister, that the security situation in Cambodia is being pro-actively addressed. However, assurances are insufficient in themselves, and it is only through concrete actions to stop political violence that Cambodians will feel free to voice their true will at the ballot box. It is incumbent upon Cambodian officials to follow through on their assurances with credible investigations and prosecutions of acts of political violence.

IRI is deeply concerned about restricted access to the broadcast media. State media continues to be a promotional vehicle for the ruling party, while coverage of independent and opposition activities is almost nonexistent. Television and radio frequencies continue to be restricted to pro-government broadcasters while independent and opposition voices are kept from the airwaves. The delegation believes that fair and equal access to the media will be a key factor in determining whether this year's elections are free and fair.

## **Voter Registration**

Our focus during this visit has been the registration process, which began on January 17. The integrity of the registration process is an important measure of the fairness of an election. This year, an additional one to two million voters are reported to be eligible for registration, and IRI will monitor carefully how many of these new voters will be registered. IRI welcomes the decision of the National Assembly to use the voter rolls from the 2002 election as a basis for voter registration. However, direct observation

corroborates press reports that a number of new voters have faced delays and impediments as they attempted to register.

IRI is troubled that the electoral bureaucracy is not genuinely independent, but is under the control of one political party from the national level down to the communes. In nearly all registration stations visited, the Commune Council Members, Commune Clerk, Assistant Clerk and others present were disproportionately members of the CPP. This problem is further exacerbated by the location of some registration offices adjoining CPP offices and the reliance on CPP village and commune chiefs to communicate registration information to voters.

We are also disturbed by numerous reports of officials interfering with efforts by the opposition party to encourage voter registration. In some cases, opposition members have had their equipment confiscated for playing official tapes issued by the NEC. Just yesterday in Kampong Thom, opposition party officials were briefly detained for playing a taped message by their party leader that encouraged people to become registered.

IRI observed that local officials fail to adhere to consistent standards from one commune to another. This problem was most acute in determining standards of identification required for voters to become registered. IRI found that in some communes, a family book is required to become registered, while NEC posters show more than a dozen different forms of acceptable identification. New voters who have recently turned 18, or have just moved into the area are the least likely to have this form of identification. Obtaining such identification is made all the more difficult by reported demands of bribes for granting the identification.

Another area where commune officials do not act using uniform standards is in determining when and where registration officials will move from the commune office to mobile voter registration sites. While IRI applauds efforts to reach voters wherever they may be, the dates and locations for mobile registration must be more effectively standardized and publicized. Other commune offices have abruptly closed their doors or have failed to inform local citizens of their schedules.

Efforts by well-meaning local officials to inform voters about the registration process and to carry out their electoral duties have been further hampered by the limited allocation of resources to communes to carry out these activities. Commune budgets typically ranged from \$15 to \$25 for the entire registration process and have not been sufficient for local officials to carry out their duties. In Battambang, promised disbursements have not yet been delivered.

One area of special interest to IRI is the registration and participation of Cambodia's 50,000 Buddhist monks in the electoral process. We are concerned by the recent statement by the Buddhist Patriarch the Venerable Tep Vong that monks should not vote. The right of all Cambodian citizens, including monks, to vote is guaranteed by the Cambodian constitution and this fundamental political right cannot and should not be denied by anyone. Nevertheless, in Phnom Penh, registration officials have prevented

monks from registering as recently as yesterday. This is in direct contradiction of the assurance given to us personally by the chairman of the NEC. Cambodian monks should not be prevented from exercising their constitutional right to become registered and to vote.

The national parliamentary elections to be held in July 2003 present a clear opportunity for the Government of Cambodia to demonstrate to the Cambodian people and the international community that the problems and irregularities that occurred in past elections have been corrected and that the election process that begins with voter registration this month will be carried out in a free and fair manner. There is still time to correct the deficiencies identified by IRI in this first pre-election assessment.

His Majesty the King, Prime Minister Hun Sen, and the leaders of Cambodia's three major political parties all expressed their appreciation for the role that IRI has played in supporting democracy in Cambodia. IRI will continue to support Cambodia's electoral process through continued pre-election monitoring and reporting, training for Cambodian political parties, and support for voter education and mobilization.

We would like to end our statement with the words of His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk to our delegation during our visit to the Royal Palace, "The People are the real master of the destiny of the nation. Everything depends on the people." It is our sincere hope that the people of Cambodia respond to the King's words and exercise their right to register to vote.

*IRI has worked in Cambodia for more than a decade with political parties, civic groups, local governments and nongovernmental organizations on strengthening the institutions of democracy. IRI has observed more than 100 elections worldwide and has sponsored observation missions to Cambodia's 1993, 1998 and 2002 elections. IRI will conduct an election observation in Cambodia for the July 27, 2003 parliamentary elections.*

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