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**International Republican Institute  
Cambodia Voter Registration Report  
February 14, 2003**

Registration for Cambodia's July 27, 2003 parliamentary elections began on January 17 and is scheduled to end on February 20. The 5.7 million voters who registered for last February's commune level local elections are not required to register again, but an estimated 1.6 million voters are eligible to have their names added to voter rolls. These voters are likely to be disproportionately supportive of the opposition because they are comprised of young voters (18-23) and voters who faced obstacles in becoming registered in the past. For the first time, voter registration is being implemented by Cambodia's 1,621 commune administrations.

Since the beginning of the voter registration period, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has monitored registration with its own credentialed observers, through its partnership with the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), and by using reports from local organizations, the press, and the National Election Committee (NEC). During the voter registration period, IRI monitors have visited more than 50 registration sites in eight provinces, and CCHR monitors visited more than 300 registration sites in 12 provinces. IRI will continue to monitor voter registration and the pre-election period and will issue periodic reports and recommendations until the July 27, 2003 election.

IRI commends the Cambodian people for their continued desire to participate in the electoral process and is pleased with improvements introduced to the registration framework. Below are observations highlighting concerns with the registration process and the pre-election political environment and recommendations designed to strengthen the registration process in its final days. Selected cases of fraud and irregularities identified by CCHR monitors, and the January 24 statement of IRI's registration assessment team are appendices to this report and can be found at [www.iri.org](http://www.iri.org).

**Observations**

*Voter Registration*

- **Registration rates are lower than expected.** Of an estimated 1.6 million Cambodians eligible to add their names to voter rolls, only 1.02 million (64%) have registered as of February 14.
- **Procedures are not being consistently followed.** Voter registration sites operate at times and locations that are irregular and poorly publicized. They often lack important forms or materials – particularly cameras for taking photos for voter cards. Standards of identification for voters vary from one registration site to the next, often based on political considerations.

- **Registration is insufficiently publicized.** Many communes have received less than \$0.01 per voter to publicize registration. Activities by opposition and independent groups to inform voters about registration using nonpartisan, and in some cases official NEC messages, have been stopped by government authorities. More than 30 opposition activists have been detained for trying to give voters information about registration.
- **The registration process is not fully independent of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP).** For the first time, commune officials are responsible for voter registration. Of these, 98% of commune chiefs belong to CPP, and commune clerks are also overwhelmingly CPP members. Chiefs and clerks both report to the Interior Ministry and are not sufficiently accountable to electoral authorities. The impartiality of the voter registration process is therefore open to question.
- **Numerous cases of intimidation, election irregularities, and fraud have been reported.** Domestic monitors have observed registration sites in private homes of CPP members, adjoining CPP offices, and inside police stations. Uniformed and plainclothes police are present and taking an active role in some registration sites. In addition, domestic monitors have witnessed and documented several cases of underage voters and non-citizens being registered under the patronage of local authorities and school officials, and without required documentation.
- **Cambodia's 50,000 Buddhist monks face obstacles to registration.** The leadership of Cambodia's Buddhist clergy has actively discouraged monks from exercising their constitutional right to vote. Monks are disproportionately young, educated and respected in society, and are considered to be a strong constituency for Cambodia's opposition.

#### *Election Environment*

- **Violence and intimidation continue to frustrate legitimate political activity.** Grassroots opposition activists are regularly threatened, and the murder of 10 political activists since the February 2002 local elections has had a chilling effect on the conduct of legitimate political activities. The absence of credible prosecutions in these cases perpetuates the climate of impunity for political violence.
- **Anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh on January 29 distracted domestic and international attention** from the task of registering voters for parliamentary elections. Subsequent persecution of independent and opposition figures damaged their ability to organize like-minded citizens for registration.
- **Independent and opposition groups are denied access to the broadcast media.** Radio and television are the most important ways of reaching Cambodian voters and are completely dominated by government and pro-government broadcasters. Cambodia's only independent radio station, "Beehive 105," was shut down when its owner was arrested immediately after the January 29 riots.

#### **Recommendations**

##### *Voter Registration*

- **Extend the voter registration period.** IRI welcomes the 2-5 day extension of voter registration (varying by commune) announced by the NEC on February 11. However, the inadequacies of voter registration information, the inconsistent times and locations for registration, political upheaval related to the January 29 riots, and the relatively low number of new voters who have registered to date make it necessary to extend the voter

registration period as long as possible until all eligible voters have had sufficient information and opportunity to register.

- **Use radio and television to publicize voter registration.** Broadcast media remains the most important source of information for citizens. The NEC should ensure the efficient and broad dissemination of registration information using radio and television.
- **Hold local officials accountable for impartial management of voter registration.** Local officials who violate elections laws and procedures should be prosecuted and punished in accordance with the law. Failure to do so will encourage commune chiefs and clerks to continue to operate on behalf of their party rather than on behalf of the NEC.
- **Defend and promote the right of Buddhist monks to vote.** The NEC, Buddhist clergy and government authorities should encourage monks to exercise their right to vote as outlined in the Constitution and supported by King Sihanouk. Information on the rights of monks to vote should be disseminated more widely.
- **Document irregularities and utilize complaints mechanisms.** All political parties should continue their monitoring activities through the end of the registration process. If election procedures are not followed, party agents should file complaints to ensure that voters are properly registered, and track the progress of these complaints through the appeals process.
- **Include opposition and independent representatives in the election administration.** Permanent provincial and commune election committees have yet to be formed by the NEC and should include opposition and independent representatives. Changes to the NEC and appointments to its secretariat could also be made to redress the partisanship of election administration at the national level.

#### *Election Environment*

- **Prosecution and punishment for human rights and electoral violations.** Impunity remains one of the greatest obstacles to fair elections in Cambodia. As long as party operatives and government officials can intimidate and murder their opponents and can flout election laws and procedures without fear of punishment, such acts will continue. The political will to end impunity must come from the top levels of government.
- **Make broadcast frequencies and advertising available to all political groups on an equitable basis.** Unless independent and opposition political groups gain access to broadcast media to present their views, voters will not be able to make a free and informed choice when they cast their vote.

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