



NDI
*National Democratic
Institute for
International
Affairs*

**Public Attitudes Toward Democracy in
Cambodia: A Focus Group Study**

April 5 - 12, 1996

Cambodia

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Acknowledgments

NDI would like to express its appreciation to those individuals and organizations involved in this project. Special thanks go to Al Quinlan, President of Greenberg Research, for his critical help designing, conducting, and analyzing the focus groups. LICADHO, ADHOC, the Center for Social Development, the Khmer Institute for Democracy and the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace generously provided their time and suggestions. Sar Vathana, Moung Sophal and Mucchim Khounson proved to be extremely skilled and dedicated moderators. NDI would also like to thank the focus group participants for their willingness to engage in discussions on difficult issues. Thanks also go to NDI Program Officer Lynn Heller, who worked with Al Quinlan to develop the moderators' guide, to NDI Program Officer Sophie Richardson, who helped Mr. Quinlan in conducting the focus groups sessions in Cambodia, and to NDI Program Officer Chris Homan, who assisted in all aspects of the project. Finally, NDI also wishes to express its appreciation to the National Endowment for Democracy, which provided the financial support that enabled NDI to conduct this project.

I. Introduction

In April 1996, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) conducted 10 focus groups in Cambodia in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the Cambodian people's perceptions of elections and democracy. As part of its ongoing program to assist Cambodian political parties and NGOs, NDI felt it was important to determine attitudes toward past and prospective elections, perceptions of government and its role in people's lives, and perceptions of people's own roles in politics and government.

The information gained from these focus groups is summarized in this report. It is NDI's hope that these insights will be particularly useful to Cambodian NGOs in their efforts to develop and design civic and voter education materials. NDI is also pleased to make this information available to individuals and groups concerned with democracy in Cambodia.

This report provides insights into Cambodian views toward voting and democracy and toward the changes in their lives since the 1993 elections. It is not intended to be a comprehensive study of public opinion or the political process in Cambodia and should not be interpreted as such. As public opinion is constantly evolving, reacting to new information and changing circumstances, the information in this report will require constant re-examination.

A Note on Focus Groups

Focus groups are semi-structured discussions on specific topics, and they are a means of eliciting public opinions on particular issues. A moderator guides the discussion of 10 to 12 participants, and the discussion usually lasts one to two hours. Unlike the results of a quantitative survey, which are statistically representative of the sample population, focus groups are not precise measures of public attitudes due to their small sample size. The discussions are considered qualitative research, which is helpful in gaining more an in-depth understanding of public attitudes and attitude formation.

These focus groups were designed and conducted with the assistance of Greenberg Research, Inc., a well-known American public opinion research firm.

The questionnaire. A questionnaire, or guide, of issues to be discussed was developed for moderators to use in leading discussions. NDI was aware that for political and cultural reasons it might be difficult to engage Cambodians in an open discussion of a variety of issues. Creating a questionnaire that would not make the focus group participants uncomfortable was as much of a challenge as conducting the actual groups. In an effort to find ways to ask important questions in a sensitive manner, NDI received extensive input from Cambodian NGOs and individuals. NDI relied heavily on this broad group of organizations and individuals to provide guidance on "Cambodianizing" the format and the questions. The questionnaire was the result of a collaborative effort, and a careful examination of how the questions were asked is critical to understanding and interpreting the report that follows.

In keeping with standard focus group procedure, the Cambodian focus group moderators were instructed to ask questions in an open-ended manner. The moderators encouraged participants to share their opinions and be creative with the more abstract questions. Though this did not often stimulate the kind of intra-participant dialogue that focus groups try to encourage, it did allow participants to not answer if they were not comfortable with the question. Consequently, when reading the report, it is reasonable to assume that if a question appears not to have yielded answers, it was an issue too sensitive to be discussed.

The focus groups. The groups of people and the locations chosen for focus groups were based on UNTAC's 1993 demographic information. This data showed approximately 70 percent of the population living in rural areas in the central third of the country and working in some form of agriculture. Five of the 10 focus groups were conducted in rural areas representing varying degrees of affluence. Kompong Speu was considered the poorest, Prey Veng moderately poor, and Kompong Cham relatively well-off. Three groups were conducted in Phnom Penh: one with uneducated working men, one with male law school students, and one with women professionals. In Siem Reap, focus groups were conducted with female elementary school teachers and with educated men.

Two trial groups with agricultural workers in Kandal and Takeo and one trial group with university students in Phnom Penh led NDI to the conclusion that separating the groups by gender

would encourage greater participation. The trial groups in Kandal and Phnom Penh were mixed, and the women voiced very few opinions. When they did answer questions, it was because the moderator had specifically requested a particular woman's opinion, and this was clearly uncomfortable for her. The group in Takeo included only women, and their participation was dramatically different.

Before groups were conducted in rural areas, NDI would obtain permission from the local commune chief and then from the village chief. Participants were selected based on their interest and willingness to talk. In one rural discussion, the village chief participated in the group. In urban areas, groups were either arranged by the NDI staff or by Khmer NGOs. No officials participated in those groups. NDI faced little resistance to holding any of the discussions, and the extent to which people were willing to openly express their opinions was encouraging.

The moderators. NDI hired three Cambodians to act as moderators/translators. All three individuals had experience working as translators for various divisions of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), international NGOs and foreign government agencies. The moderators were selected on the basis of their ability to translate simultaneously, and on their understanding of the questions being asked. They received one full day of training from Greenberg Research on moderating techniques. The three alternated moderating, translating for the focus group expert and NDI staff member, and translating into a tape recorder.

Major findings

Three years after the UNTAC elections, the participants viewed the future of Cambodian democracy as uncertain and subject to numerous challenges. Concerns were expressed about democracy, the local elections in 1997 and the national elections in 1998. While elections in general were viewed positively, the participants appeared to feel little connection with their government and even less connection to the politics practiced by their leaders. To a certain extent, they seem to be waiting for the political leadership to provide the motivation for and direction of change.

Key Concerns: The findings were not surprising, given recent Cambodian history combined with a low level of socio-economic development. The participants expressed serious concerns about the government's ability to deliver basic services, maintain peace, keep the country secure, uphold justice and allow people to pursue their livelihoods. Above all else, participants desired a better standard of living. They also showed a deep yearning for peace and security. Concern was expressed about continuing abuses of power. Disunity is seen as a major roadblock to progress.

Attitudes about political institutions and processes: What emerged was a portrait of a people whose impressions of democracy were positive but who believe they lack even the most basic knowledge and confidence to bring about the necessary changes. There was a sense that the government had improved, but that it remains distant. Participants did not express a great deal of confidence in Khmer institutions. They did not show an overwhelming desire to rise up and actively work for change, but rather a desire for their leaders, and the international community, to step in and improve their situation. The participants had a top-down view of democracy, in which democracy was

equated with peace and a better standard of living. Elections were viewed positively, but there was an absence of meaningful political discourse.

Implications for assisting Cambodian democracy: Perhaps most critical to understanding the challenges facing proponents of democracy was the relative complacency with the status quo. International involvement in the upcoming elections was seen as critical. Participants emphasized that democracy must be shown to be capable of fostering peace, unity and a measure of prosperity. A strategy aimed at providing motivation to support elections and democracy should pay attention to concerns with standard of living, peace and security and attempt to address them in a compelling manner. There must also be a recognition of the extremely low level of education and the very basic understanding of democratic institutions and processes. Of all the domestic groups NDI asked about, only Khmer NGOs were considered relatively reliable in terms of serving the good faith interests of the general public. Finally, the participants expressed a preference for radio as the most accessible means of communication, and they considered VOA to be particularly trustworthy.

II. Key Concerns of the Participants

The focus group discussions sought to identify the key concerns and aspirations of the participants. Not surprisingly, the participants expressed a strong desire for a more prosperous, secure and stable future.

Above all else, participants sought a better standard of living.

In virtually every group, participants expressed deep concerns about the basics of life: food, water, health care, education for their children and the ability to earn a decent living. The degree to which these concerns outweighed more "political" issues was striking. Interestingly, participants did not consider their standard of living to be a "political" issue.

Not surprisingly, participants in relatively prosperous villages were generally more positive about their standard of living than those in less well-off areas. They also clearly felt more connected to the government and could identify the benefits it had bestowed on their communities. These participants, particularly in the relatively wealthy villages in Kompong Cham province, sensed improvement in the last few years, but expressed a need for further progress. A few cited improved infrastructure and availability of food, but in every group there was a call for improved delivery of food, health care and education for children.

The following statements illustrated these sentiments:

- The process of the government is working very well, but we cannot support our own families. (Prey Veng woman)
- We cannot do everything to support our families. We cannot help ourselves. (Prey Veng woman)
- Now our country is very developed and has progressed, but our families still have difficulties, especially in terms of agricultural equipment and materials. (Prey Veng woman)
- We are lacking everything in all areas. Even though we get some assistance from different organizations to help us, it is not enough. (Prey Veng woman)
- I think that right now our people are in a situation where, for example, we lack food, we lack rice. (Prey Veng man)
- In order to have a better standard of living, you should consider increasing agricultural production and providing transportation for people so they can travel. (Prey Veng man)

There was also a deep yearning for peace and security.

The desire for peace and security was strong, and participants made it clear that they continue to feel their security is threatened from several directions. Concerns about the Khmer Rouge - and in some cases the Vietnamese - persisted, but in many cases equal or greater concern was voiced about threats to security posed by both internal security forces and bandits.

Concerns about peace and security were most intensely felt in areas of direct contact with the Khmer Rouge, such as Siem Reap and Kompong Speu. The women of these areas spoke openly of being afraid to go out of their houses after dark and would never consider leaving their immediate area once the sun had gone down. These fears were not, however, limited to areas directly threatened by the Khmer Rouge.

Fears were expressed in statements such as:

- I want our people to live in safety. We don't want to go back to the Khmer Rouge regime where we didn't have enough food to eat. (Kompong Cham woman)
- We have a problem with bandits, and it is the government's responsibility to stop them. (Prey Veng man)
- I think that if we stop the war, we will have a free country. Because we are still at war, we are not totally free country. (Kompong Cham woman)
- It is the government's responsibility and duty to protect the country, to be independent, and defend the integrity of our territory so enemies and other countries cannot invade. (Kompong Cham man)
- We don't have the strength to fight Vietnam, and I am afraid they will invade again. (Phnom Penh law student)

Concern was expressed about abuses of power.

The participants believed there were now laws that establish the fundamental tenets of democracy, but that they were not enforced or followed either at the highest levels of government or at the village level. This was a recurring theme: the mechanisms of democracy were present but were not enforced or obeyed by those in power. Moreover, in the absence of government accountability, participants felt they had little recourse in the face of corruption and other abuses of power.

There was a strong sense that abuse of power was pervasive, but with an important distinction made between the types of abuses in Phnom Penh and those in rural areas. The prevailing concern in Phnom Penh was of the abuse of political power: human rights abuses, efforts by the government

and parties to muzzle dissent, and intimidation of the media. The working class men interviewed in Phnom Penh seemed to feel particularly strong about these abuses.

Their comments included:

- We cannot discuss [our complaints] with other people. You can't complain to the other people, or to the government.
- The government still tries to put pressure on the opposition parties to delay their campaigns until it's too late, too close to the elections. Those opposition parties cannot organize well, it's just not possible.
- We would like to know about the government from the newspapers, but the government never lets people know about their wrongdoings.
- People working in the judicial system should be independent, not under the influence of the government or any other organization. The courts work for money, the courts work for power, and the courts operate according to politics.

In rural areas, however, the concerns expressed about abuse of power had little to do with political freedoms. Rather, the concern was with the costs of kickbacks and of profit-skimming by government officials and the police, and how corruption affects participants' daily struggles to earn a decent living. As a result, it was felt that little was left for the people.

Their frustrations were expressed this way:

- Whatever the government wants to donate to the people we want donated directly to us as it is. Donations get skimmed as they go from the top authorities to the lower authorities and then to the people. (Prey Veng woman)
- The government always uses briberies and corruption. (Prey Veng woman)
- People in the countryside have no food because of the government and corruption. (Phnom Penh man)

Political disunity was seen as a major roadblock to progress.

A concern with political disunity was conveyed in the discussions in every region. Disunity was seen as a major impediment to national progress. The perceived inability of the Khmer leadership and people to unify and work together was seen as keeping the country and its people from moving forward.

The desire for unity manifested itself in participants' expressions of frustration with political leaders' apparent inability to work together for the good of the country. Repeated reference was made to the continuing disunity of the people and its disabling effect on the country as a whole. From the comments emerged a collective sense of persistent political infighting, which was perceived as making it more difficult for the average Cambodian to improve his or her lot. As a woman in Kompong Cham said, "We need to unify, we need to have a real government. We need to work together."

Other statements included:

- In Cambodia, democracy is based on the two prime ministers, and the national assembly cannot freely decide what it should do. There is pressure between those two parties about the segregation of power. (Phnom Penh man)
- We are afraid of the political parties if they are breaking from each other...if the political parties cannot work together, there will be problems, and it will very difficult for the people to live in peace. (Kompong Cham man)
- I think that our Khmer people need to learn how to live with each other. . . right now we still have discrimination, this Khmer against that Khmer. But if we have ideal unity, our country will be a free country. . . A good leader is one who always unifies and doesn't care about a party. (Kompong Cham woman)
- A democracy means peace and security, safety, and no fighting and no divisions of parties. Even after the Khmer Rouge, our country has many differences within and between parties. (Siem Reap man)
- We are very worried about war and afraid of the conflicts between party leaders. (Siem Reap woman)
- Free elections in a democratic society. . . will bring peace to our countryside. People in the political parties will decide their differences and stop waging war with each other, and they can work to make Cambodia a better and safer place for everyone. (Siem Reap woman)
- We are afraid that now we have two prime ministers in our one government. This is not good for making decisions. (Phnom Penh woman)

III. Attitudes about Cambodian political institutions and processes

The focus group discussions also sought to solicit the participants' views about Cambodian political institutions and processes and the impact of those institutions and processes on their lives. While many participants felt that the political environment in Cambodia had improved, many also expressed a sense of distance from and distrust of their political institutions.

Participants expressed a sense that the government was better than before.

The focus groups revealed a general impression that the situation in Cambodia had improved in the past few years, and that the country might be on the right track after two decades of strife and war. While participants were not entirely satisfied with their lives or their leaders, there was a general sense that the country was in better shape than it had been in quite some time. There was a feeling, particularly among those who were from wealthier areas, that the country was now more stable and in a position to make progress both politically and economically. This general satisfaction was most prevalent in the relatively wealthy area of Kompong Cham.

Some participants gave Second Prime Minister Hun Sen credit for bringing a degree of stability and improving the standard of living in some tangible ways. King Norodom Sihanouk and First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh were largely seen more as national, cultural symbols rather than political figures.

Participants elaborated with the following statements:

- I think that the government has not committed any bad acts. I think that right now we are safer. (Kompong Cham woman)
- I think that some things are getting better, like the standard of living. (Prey Veng man)
- I think that we still have corruption, but I think it is better than before. (Kompong Cham woman)
- The government has stopped taking money from people like it used to. (Siem Reap woman)

The government appeared distant.

With the exception of those living in Phnom Penh, the participants feel far removed from the national government ("never see them"). Wealthier villagers expressed a closer connection to and understanding of the government than those less well off. Participants' sense of disengagement from their government was dramatic. It spoke to the isolation participants feel in the countryside, particularly in Kompong Speu and Prey Veng, which receive virtually no attention from government. In general, however, there was little contact with the national government or its representatives, and the rural participants' only real connection was with the local village chiefs.

- The district or section chief cannot solve any problems if we do not have money to give him or her. . . I do not know who my [National Assembly] representative is because he comes from a political party. (Phnom Penh man)
- I don't know who runs the government right now - I don't think the village chief can relate to that person. The commune chief just works in his office and I just work in my house. (Kompong Speu woman)
- We want a government that can answer directly to the people, that can understand the basic needs of the people in the low level and local area. That way people can complain directly to the government. Otherwise, the government is very far from the people, and the people cannot do anything. If the village or commune chiefs do not care about our problems, we cannot do anything. (Kompong Cham man)
- The government does not do anything as the people demand. When they go to the countryside or different rural areas, they just go to admire or praise their own activity. . . they don't feel a need to support or develop the people with education so they can understand democracy and society. Party leaders only work for their parties. (Phnom Penh woman)

Confidence in Khmer institutions was low.

One of the most striking and consistent messages conveyed by the participants was a lack of confidence in the integrity of key national institutions. There appears to be little confidence in the political elite, the political parties, the armed forces, the judicial system, the police, and the media. The participants were uniformly skeptical about the government's and parties' desire to represent the interests of the people. It was felt that few in government spoke for the people and that government was responsive only to itself or to powerful interests. Only Khmer NGOs, which were not seen as a terribly powerful force in society, were generally thought not to be motivated by self-interest or dominated by political affiliation.

Participants saw the government, the police and the media as being virtually indistinguishable from the political parties. According to participants (and particularly the Phnom Penh participants), the government was "run by the political parties," members of the National Assembly were beholden "only to their political parties," and the media "work for the political parties" and were not seen as independent voices. The view was frequently expressed that the judicial system was run by people who "work for money - if someone has a lot of money, they win in their litigation or civil actions."

Statements included:

- The people [here] are not honest, not fair. We need the international community to help our people because our own authorities are not honest. They are not honest. And we cannot trust them. (Prey Veng woman)

- It is not good if the [electoral] commission members are selected by the National Assembly. We vote to select the members of the National Assembly. If the National Assembly assigns their people to supervise the election, it will be nonsense. (Phnom Penh man)

The focus groups strongly suggested that participants feel the government cannot be relied upon to hold a free and fair election. The participants' lack of confidence in the political leadership on this fundamental question was striking. The 1993 elections were the only positive major political event in which the participants felt they had been involved. An awareness of the critical role played by the international community in that election, combined with a concern about pervasive corruption, generated a strong desire for foreign involvement in the future.

The participants had a top-down view of democracy.

The focus groups suggested that average Cambodians feel they have a limited role to play in their democracy. Rather than viewing themselves as major players with rights and responsibilities, they believe that the responsibility to bring about positive change and build democracy lies with their leaders and with the international community.

The participants were looking for others to produce the changes needed to allow democratic processes to take root. They did not feel their participation, beyond having voted in the 1993 elections, was either genuinely encouraged or influential. The role they see for themselves was one of being good citizens who participate in a free society by "obeying the laws," "having respect for the laws," and "earning a decent living." The participants felt that because they were average people who lacked education they were not able to effectively exert much influence on the political process.

A strong sense of political inadequacy, particularly among women, was evident and produces a lack of confidence in playing a larger role in a democratic government. Rural participants said their lack of education makes them incapable of assuming any kind of decision-making or leadership role. This puts serious limits on the role they envision for themselves and therefore enhances their reliance on political leaders and international institutions. They do not assume their own life experiences may be relevant in terms of holding public office and representing their people. Not surprisingly, these feelings of inadequacy were most prevalent in the poorer areas of Kompong Speu and Prey Veng.

Participants described this problem with the following statements:

- [People] do not understand the law well, so we cannot understand how to be a democracy. (Kompong Cham woman)
- We cannot change anything at all. We just need support from the government to help with problems here. People here are very poor, and I cannot think about the government. (Kompong Speu woman)

Democracy was equated with peace and a better standard of living.

While there was a general sense that democracy required respect for the law, participants uniformly saw democracy primarily as a means to peace and a better standard of living.

They gave the following examples:

- The effect democracy will have on my family is that we will not have war in our country or among our people. (Kompong Cham woman)
- A democratic society means that the country is free and peaceful. There is no war. (Siem Reap man)
- Independence here means peace. (Kompong Speu woman)

Some of the focus group participants also equated democracy with freedom, but their desire for freedom clearly had more to do with a desire for the freedom to earn a better living than with political freedoms. This vision of democracy focuses on the freedom to use one's skills to earn the best life possible for oneself and one's family.

Participants offered these explanations about their perceptions of freedom:

- When we talk about a free country, we mean that people have the right to go to anywhere to earn a living. Communists limit our travel, our ability to earn a living. (Kompong Cham woman)
- In a democracy, we can make our living freely, we won't have any violence, we won't have anybody come to arrest us or take any property from us. (Prey Veng woman)
- In a free society we can make a living and we can go everywhere as we want - no one will prevent us. (Prey Veng man)

The 1993 UNTAC elections were viewed positively.

Participants' positive feelings for elections should not be understated. Impressions of the UNTAC-administered 1993 elections were generally positive. In many cases their recollections of voting were very specific and in virtually every instance they felt safe and secure when casting their ballots. The credit for this was given to UNTAC and the international community. As a corollary to this, the focus groups suggested that if political parties do not demonstrate a greater commitment to free and fair elections in the near future, it was unlikely that Cambodian voters will feel secure voting without an international presence.

If anything came of the last election, it was that these participants felt good about voting and feel confident, to a degree, that it can work. Even though the end result may not have been what

participants expected, positive impressions remained about the process itself, providing a solid foundation on which to build.

Participants discussed the lack of meaningful political discourse in their lives.

The participants said they did not discuss politics either regularly or in great detail. Instead, most participants' conversations with their families and neighbors were centered around their "real life" concerns, which rarely included politics. Participants did not often voluntarily exhibit a strong political orientation.

Phnom Penh participants said they regularly discussed Cambodia's political situation. In the city participants were more closely connected with the political situation and, in their eyes, more directly affected by it. The working class men in Phnom Penh peppered their comments with political asides and were far more focused on the politics than participants in the rural areas. The urban women professionals also clearly included political issues more regularly in their day-to-day conversations, as did the male law school students. One urban woman expressed concern over this particular issue as it affected people in the rural areas:

- Right now we see the people living in the countryside want to learn what human rights are. But they are very afraid, and they fear pressure from the authorities. Of course, what they want to say is true, but they're just afraid to say it. So if the people in the countryside can learn about and use these rights, it is very good. The people in the countryside always try to work and help each other.

The widespread disconnection from politics - or at least elite politics - suggested that ideology and politics are viewed as irrelevant or politically dangerous to most participants' lives. Politics, ideologies and the divisiveness that have characterized the political situation for more than two decades appear to be viewed as obstacles to progress. The apparently deliberate absence of ideology was striking, and participants spoke of their desire to move beyond partisan politics and on to other more pressing issues and concerns.

IV. Implications for assisting Cambodian democracy

Many of the insights gained from the focus group discussions had relevance for Cambodian and international groups involved in protecting and strengthening democracy. The implications for the efforts of these groups include the following.

International involvement in the upcoming elections was seen as critical.

Based on the focus groups, it appeared unlikely that the participants would feel safe and free to participate in elections without substantial international involvement. Very little has happened since 1993 to alter the participants' impressions that only international assistance can produce free and safe elections. Their skepticism seems rooted in the reality that the only free elections they can remember were those of three years ago, which were organized and administered by the international community. But equally important was the perceived failure of the political leadership in Cambodia to foster democracy in the country since the elections. After years of strife, disunity and war, participants were not convinced that the Khmer political elite was committed to free elections.

Statements to support this included:

- We want the international community to come monitor and hold the elections so that we don't have any disputes about political parties. (Kompong Cham man)
- The future election will not be good if UNTAC will not come again. And so it is very important. If UNTAC comes again to organize the next election, then the process of election will be free and good. Otherwise, it will not be good. (Siem Reap man)
- If we have no assistance from international NGOs or the international community, we will be intimidated by the authorities. (Siem Reap man)

To date, there has been very little preparation for the elections by the government or major political parties. Efforts to motivate people to support elections should begin as soon as possible, and should focus on the absolute basics and build from the ground up. This could include civic and voter education efforts, regular visits to constituencies by elected officials and organized community discussions on pertinent issues.

Democracy must be shown to be capable of delivering peace, unity and a measure of prosperity.

It is critical to frame a discussion of democracy and elections around the issues that matter most to people and which were most closely associated with democracy in their minds. A strategy aimed at shaping the debate around human rights abuses, freedom of speech, and political repression had power among professionals and people in Phnom Penh, but had limited value outside the city. Professionals and people in Phnom Penh should be considered a strong base of support for democracy, but for people in the countryside, a different strategy will need to be developed.

Actual issues raised repeatedly included improved infrastructure, education and social services. Land distribution was a particularly pressing concern in the rural areas, and participants said that the confusion over this issue prevented them from moving freely about the country. This, in turn, prevents participants' ability to improve their standard of living. Government assistance in terms of agricultural equipment and irrigation was described as inadequate.

Uniform implementation and enforcement of laws was consistently cited as a problem. Participants from every area noted that laws are not fully implemented and not uniformly applied, and that this only allows the security conditions to further deteriorate. One woman in Kompong Cham expressed frustration that candidates do not discuss "people's rights and freedom, justice for the people."

Very few participants could clearly delineate the different roles and responsibilities of commune chiefs and National Assembly members. Participants made the very basic distinction between issues of local and national interest, but did not make a connection between the two. Further education on what specific functions these representatives are supposed to undertake was clearly expressed as an interest of the participants'.

Effective methods of communicating through television, radio and Voice of America.

The means of communicating with people in Cambodia are limited, although there have been dramatic improvements in recent years as the reach of radio and television has been extended far into the countryside. Virtually everyone is reached by radio and those in some areas also have access to television, which has a great deal of potential. Newspapers are read almost exclusively in the large cities and play a minimal role in the lives of rural people.

There was a degree of skepticism about these sources of information as some realize the partisan nature of the news they receive. However, most rural participants left little doubt that television was a particularly powerful medium and, in the eyes of some, is credible because they can see what is being discussed.

It was Voice of America (VOA) that was almost universally accepted as the most credible vehicle for communication. Participants from every group cited VOA as the most believable source of information, which again demonstrates the credibility that outside, international influences has with the people of Cambodia. Radio UNTAC received equally glowing reviews from the participants. The history of VOA and its broadcasts on weather and farming, coupled with its impartiality, produced a remarkable response, and participants spoke at great length about its value.

Their comments were telling:

- I trust only the information that is broadcast by VOA. (Kompong Cham woman)
- The reason I trust the VOA is because every announcement is true. (Kompong Cham woman)

- Of course we believe the radio, the Americans, because whatever they say in the announcement is true. (Prey Veng woman)
- The Voice of America never lies about the news. (Kompong Speu woman)

While questions were raised about other domestic sources of news, VOA stood out in participants' minds as a credible and honest source of information. As a result, there seems little doubt that VOA should be used as extensively as possible to reach people.

Building from the Ground up with Education and Training.

Proponents of democracy and elections must consider in their strategies the sense of disconnection and the lack of knowledge people have about democratic governance and its institutional structures.

Not surprisingly, participants' opinions and level of understanding varied by province and standard of living, though there were some clear patterns that emerged which could help inform efforts to strengthen democracy in Cambodia. The most dramatic difference between these groups was the degree to which participants feel connected to government and politics.

Residents of Phnom Penh felt much more connected to the government and politics than residents of the rural areas. This did not seem to necessarily translate into greater support for the political leadership; in fact, it appeared to generate much stronger, more focused criticism about the motives of the leadership. Phnom Penh residents understood far better than others the concept of and need for democracy. Urban residents should be considered relatively easy to motivate to participate in Cambodian democracy and elections. It was the rural residents, largely ignored by the central government and unsure of its role in their lives, who will represent the greatest challenge in terms of stimulating interest in democracy and elections.

Education is critical to the successful establishment of democracy. People in the countryside fully understood the role education plays in a democracy and in their own success in life. It is lack of education that keeps them from being more active and from asserting themselves. As numerous participants said, without education they cannot understand the laws and therefore cannot truly participate as full partners in a democracy.

The importance of education and training was also fully understood by those who were trying to bring about change in Cambodia, the NGOs. In group discussions, participants made the case for international NGOs working closely with Khmer NGOs to take democracy to their people with education and training in their villages.

Consider the following statements:

- As for myself, it is important that international NGOs come to areas where the people are uneducated so they can understand democratic rights, human rights, and the law. And when the people understand all those factors, they are not afraid and can exercise democracy and their rights, human rights. (Phnom Penh woman)
- My opinion is that we just train the people, even though they cannot understand human rights and democracy. They are under pressure to not exercise their rights or democracy. And they think we must also let the international community, let the United Nations choose any plans or any projects for the government. If pressure from the United Nations is felt to implement democracy, then they will train people very well. (Phnom Penh woman)
- We should request from the United Nations and from the international community that they come and train the leaders first. Because if the leader understands and exercises democracy and human rights, the people will follow him. Then the process of democracy in Cambodia will be good. (Phnom Penh woman)

Without efforts like those described above, and the development of a strong, indigenous structure of organizations through which to educate and train people, the realization of democracy and truly free elections without assistance is unlikely.

If there is to be real change, therefore, a long-term effort aimed at building a foundation of democracy in terms of Cambodian culture, society, and politics is critical to achieving an independent, participatory government. Ultimately, this effort should not rely heavily on outside assistance. International assistance is critical to creating an environment in which people feel they can freely and securely cast their ballots, but this cannot last forever. The international community should instead work to strengthen Khmer NGOs and other organizations such that they can then educate and train people to participate in a democratic process.

Appendix

Cambodia Focus Groups - National Democratic Institute for International Affairs - April 5-12, 1996

Focus Group Questionnaire

I. Introduction (ten minutes) -- Explain the purpose of the discussion

- Confidentiality - identities will not be known
- No discussion of personal partisan or political leanings
- Audio taping for later analysis
- Sponsor not affiliated with any party, politician or political agenda
- Honesty - no right or wrong answers - only yours
- Only one speak at a time
- Keep responses brief -- need to hear from everyone

II. General Mood and Government (ten minutes)

A. How are things going here in Cambodia? Are they getting better or are they getting worse?

[Follow-up either:] What's getting better? What's getting worse?

Suggestions: economically, socially, politically, democracy/human rights/rule of law
How about here, in your own village/city. Are things getting better or worse?

B. What problem facing Cambodia worries you the most? [extended]

C. Who runs the government? Who's in charge?

:What is government's primary responsibility?

:What does government do right/good?

:What does government do wrong/bad? [if corruption: how does government corruption affect you and your family?

:If you could change one thing in government, what would you change?

:When you need help with something, who in government do you go to for help?

D. Where do you get information about government and politicians? [follow-up: newspaper, radio, neighbors, local leaders]

: Do you believe most of what you read or hear about government? Why?
Suggestions: Do you believe there is a surplus of rice? Do you believe Vietnam invaded Svay Rieng Province?

: Would you like more information about government and politics? What would you like to know? Who would you like to hear more from? [extended - politicians, government, NGOs, newspaper, radio]

:Whose opinion do you trust the most? Why?

III. Political and Professional Organizations and People (ten to fifteen minutes)

A. Now I'm going to read you some names of people and organizations. For each one, tell me what is the first image that pops into your head. Just give me a word or a phrase, very brief. [Move around the group and get short words or phrases from each person.]

1. Khmer journalists
2. Police and soldiers
3. Khmer NGO's
4. King Norodom Sihanouk
5. Hun Sen
6. Prince Norodom Ranariddh
7. Sam Rainsy
8. International NGOs
9. The political parties

[separately: CCP, FUNCINPEC, BLDP, KHMER NATION]

IV. Democracy and the UNTAC Elections (twenty to twenty-five minutes)

A. What does the word 'democracy' mean to you? [extended -- short comments from everyone]

:What makes a country a democracy?

: When you think of a democratic, free country, what do you see? What is it like?

B. Is Cambodia a democratic country? Why/why not? [extended -- comments from everyone]

:Is it important for Cambodia to be a democratic or free country? Why or why not?

C. Let's imagine Cambodia is truly a democratic, free country. What would make Cambodia a democratic or free country?

:How would it be different? [good or bad?]

: What would that mean in your life for you and your family? [extended: positive and negative reactions separately] How would your life change?

:Who would benefit the most if Cambodia was a democratic society? [if the people:
How would they benefit?

: What would be the government's responsibility and duties in a democratic, free society?

: How about your responsibilities as a citizen in a free society - what are they?

D. Think back to the elections three years ago. What do you remember most about those elections? [extended -- brief comments from everyone]

:Why were those elections held?

: Did you vote? Describe the procedure - was it easy or not so easy? How did you learn the procedure for voting?

:How did you receive information about the elections: radio, newspapers, posters?

: How did you feel the day you voted?

E. Why was the election successful?

F. What good things came about because of the elections?

:Did anything bad come about because of the elections?

V. Voting in Future Elections (twenty-five minutes)

A. What is the next step for elections here in Cambodia? Have you heard anything about another election? [discussion] What have you heard?

[IF HAVE NOT HEARD OF ELECTIONS -- MOVE TO B]

:What will the election process be like? Who wants these elections to take place?

:Will these elections be different than the last one? How?

B. There may be elections for Commune Chiefs next year.

1. What are the duties and responsibilities of a Commune Chief?

2. What do you think about elections for Commune Chief? Good idea? Why?

:Are these elections important? Do they matter to you and your family? Why?

: What will election day be like?

:Will they be different from the UNTAC election? [if yes, how?]

:Will you vote in these elections? Why or why not?

3. Describe the type of person you would like to see as your Commune Chief? What qualities should he have?

4. Do you think these elections will be free and honest? Why? [extended follow-up: intimidation, violence] Why?

C. There may also be elections for National Assembly.

1. What are the duties and responsibilities of a member of the National Assembly?

:Are they different from a Commune Chief?

:Does your representative ever come to your village?

2. What do you think about these elections for National Assembly?

: Will they be different from elections for Commune Chief? How?

3. Describe the type of person you would like to see as a candidate for National Assembly?

4. Do you think these elections will be free and honest? [follow-up:] Why/Why not?

:What must take place for these elections to be free and honest?

:[if cite the need for international assistance:] What if there is no international assistance, what happens then?

D. Thinking of these elections for Commune Chief and National Assembly -- who will benefit the most? [IMPORTANT -- COMMENTS FROM EVERYONE]

E. When you think about the next elections, what changes would you like to see take place?

:What issues and problems would you like to hear discussed by candidates for office?
[nationality law, corruption, immigration law, land distribution]

[NEXT SECTION VERY IMPORTANT -- NEED DISCUSSION FROM ENTIRE GROUP]

F. What would convince you the elections will be safe, free and honest? [extended discussion]
Suggestions: party promises the elections will be peaceful, presence of domestic monitors, presence of international monitors

: Who could convince you? [extended]

: Where and in what form would you like to see this information? [extended: newspaper, radio, neighbors, family, local leaders, national leaders, international leaders]

G. A Commission may be named to supervise these elections. What types of people should be on this Commission? [discussion, then read list below] Should any of the following be considered? Why or why not?

[follow-up for each:] Should they be considered? Why or why not?

- a. Representatives chosen by the Throne Council/King?
- b. Representatives chosen by the National Assembly?
- c. Representatives of the political parties?
- d. Representatives from Khmer NGOs?
- e. International representatives? Who?
- f. Who else should be on the commission?

VI. Motivation for the Next Elections and Democracy (twenty minutes)

Now I want to read you some short statements about free elections and democracy. Forget everything else we've talked about today and think only about these statements. After I read each one, we'll discuss how that statement makes you feel about elections and democracy. [discuss each separately]

1. Democratic government is founded on the belief that everyone -- leaders and the people -- should respect their laws and one another. As the first step toward democracy, free elections will help to ensure that Cambodia's leaders respect the laws and the rights of the people, and that the people themselves will respect their leaders and each other.

:What do you think about that statement?

:How does it make you feel about elections and voting? [STRESS REASONS FOR VOTING]

Let me read the next statement.

2. Free elections and a democratic government will unify the people of Cambodia and help bring peace to our countryside. People and the political parties will put aside their differences and stop waging war with each other and instead will work together to make Cambodia a better and safer place for everyone.

:What do you think about that statement?

:How does it make you feel about elections and voting? [STRESS REASONS FOR VOTING]

Let me read the next statement.

3. Free elections and democratic government will eliminate corruption and make government serve the people instead of serving themselves. Government will be responsible to help the people earn a decent living and live a safe and healthy life.

:What do you think about that statement?

:How does it make you feel about elections and voting? [STRESS REASONS FOR VOTING]

Let me read the next statement.

4. We have a responsibility to our children to see to it that they can grow up and live in a free and democratic society. By starting now with free elections, we can remake Cambodia so our children grow up in a free society without corruption and intimidation.

:What do you think about that statement?

:How does it make you feel about elections and voting? [STRESS REASONS FOR VOTING]

Here's the last statement.

5. By holding free elections and moving toward becoming a democracy, Cambodia will send a strong message to the world that it is ready to rejoin the international community. As a stable democracy, Cambodia will be able to develop better economic and cultural relationships with many other countries that will make it a more prosperous nation.

[VERY IMPORTANT -- ENTIRE GROUP-- FOCUS ON WHAT THEY JUST HEARD]

:Of the statements I just read to you, what really stood out and makes you want to vote and work for free elections? What is the most important reason to hold free elections?

:[extended] Suggestions: respect for laws, respect for each other, peace and stability, better future for children, better standard of living, economic prosperity

[SECTION VIII FOR WOMEN ONLY]

VII. Do the political parties and government represent women? How? Why not?

1. Do women have the freedom to participate in the political process as men do? [If not:] Why not?
2. [If not represented] What prevents women from participating politically? Who is to blame? How can these obstacles be overcome?
3. Should women have more representation in the National Assembly? How about as Commune Chiefs - should women be candidates for Commune Chief?
 - a. Do women better represent the interests and concerns of women generally? Why or why not?
4. When you vote, do you think you will vote for the same party and candidates as your husband/father, or do you think you might vote for a different candidate?
5. If you had two identical candidates - but one was a man and one was a woman - who would you be more inclined to vote for?

VIII. Final Postcard

Now, one last thing and we are finished. Please take a postcard, and I want you to write to the [if possible, we should address these notes to the group identified in the group as the most credible - the NGOs, government, media, international organizations] telling them what is the most important reason to hold free elections and why people should vote in these elections. This is completely confidential, you don't need to put your name on the card.

Final: What are your impressions of our discussion and our forum?