THE ASIA FOUNDATION

VOTER AND CIVIC EDUCATION NEEDS FOR THE 2003 CAMBODIAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT BASED ON IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW RESEARCH

BY

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INTRODUCTION

This memo offers a preliminary assessment of 15 in-depth interviews on attitudes to July's forthcoming national elections in Cambodia and to the development of democracy there more generally. They were conducted in late December, 2002 among the general public in urban and peri-urban Phnom Penh and five villages in the provinces of Kandal, Kompong Speu, and Kompong Cham. The respondents included both men and women of all ages and educational levels. The interviews were the first phase of a two-phase voter education research project undertaken to help local non-governmental organizations and the Asia Foundation plan voter and civic education efforts before this year's election, with a country-wide quantitative public opinion poll to follow. This study also allows us to track changes that have occurred since we conducted similar qualitative and quantitative research in Cambodia in 2000 to plan voter education for the commune elections, which took place in 2002. The aim of this memo is to indicate the initial findings suggested by the research and their implications for voter and civic education planning.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While pointing to progress Cambodia has made in several aspects of democratization with the assistance of voter education efforts, we found new challenges have arisen for voter and civic education work in this year's election.

- The mood of respondents was generally positive, reflecting greater economic growth and peace.

- They said development is the biggest issue facing the country, as in 2000, but new issues followed: water systems (after big floods), AIDS, and Khmer-Thai

relations (even before the Jan.30 riots). At the local level, poverty remains the top problem, land disputes have emerged as a concern, water remains one, and crime receives less mention than in 2000.

- Most voters interviewed knew national elections were coming, but few knew who had to register and most thought everyone did. The early registration deadline (Feb. 15) makes information about registration requirements a top voter education priority.

- Promoting turnout does not appear to be a priority – our interviewees plan to vote.

- Confidence in the administration of the 2002 commune elections and political tolerance have improved since to our previous study, suggesting that voter education, election monitoring, and vote count reforms for the election had an impact.

- But doubts persist about cheating in the upcoming National Assembly vote, reflecting in part unease about single-party control of the electoral process. Most voters do not know to whom to complain if they see irregularities during the vote.

- The electors interviewed felt the commune elections were a positive experience because they were able to choose leaders, but they reported little change in their communes since then and have low expectations for this year's vote.

- Respondents saw little difference between the parties in the National Assembly and knew little of the Assembly's functions. Their politics is personalist: they see Assembly members as patronage brokers and elections as opportunities to demand resources.

- We found signs that many interviewees fear reprisals for expressions of dissent.

- Cambodian electors seem ashamed but torn about vote selling. Taking money to change one's vote was seen as wrong by most, but many felt guilty about taking money from one party and voting for another. Some said the poor

needed any money or gifts they could get and could always vote for the party they prefer.

- Efforts to combat vote selling should focus on breaking the moral obligation to vote for a party that provides money or gifts.

- Most participants did not belong to groups in civil society, but many wanted to.

- Women interviewed said the chief problems of women in their areas – besides poverty – are domestic violence, reproductive health and AIDS, and education. They favored women-only meetings to discuss them.

- Both women and men interviewed back more participation in politics by women and a set-aside of one third of places on party candidate lists for women.

- Voter education should start immediately with information about registration requirements. A second phase should involve civic education about inter-personal political tolerance, the role of the National Assembly, and women's political equality, as well as voter education to promote electoral accountability. The final pre-election phase should have voter education focused on issue-based voting, discouraging vote selling, promoting inter-party tolerance and non-violence, and how to respond to irregularities.

MOOD: POSITIVE DESPITE POVERTY, LAND DISPUTES, AND TENSIONS WITH THAIS

The mood among the Cambodians interviewed for this study was generally positive, reflecting the economic growth and greater political stability their country has experienced in the past couple of years. Almost all said the country was headed in the right direction.

The principal reasons for optimism they cited were development and peace. Development, particularly of infrastructure – roads, schools, wells and irrigation systems, and hospitals – was the factor most often mentioned. "Our government helps us to build schools, hospitals, roads, ponds or wells." Interviewees also noted the growth of foreign investment and factories, especially garment factories: "Foreigners are coming to the country spending US dollars and helping with providing jobs." There were a few references to the restoration of peace and free movement. "We are not at war anymore, and nowadays you don't need a paper to travel." But mentions of development were more frequent and detailed than in our qualitative study two years ago, while those of peace were less common. There appears to be a firmer sense of economic progress than at the time of our previous work, in the wake of the uncertain period between 1997-1999, while peace now seems sufficiently consolidated to be almost a given.

Assessments of the national government's job performance were also mostly positive, but nuanced, with some discontent voiced as well. The major positive was the government's focus on infrastructure development – "roads, schools, and bridges." There were also references to improvements in security ("protecting people from robbery") and a couple of mentions of gifts such as rice (although it was unclear if these were related to drought relief or intended as election-time inducements). The principal complaint, from several voters, was that government was not building infrastructure in their areas. "They never come and help us." One also voiced discontent about corruption and the imposition of school fees.

Despite the progress noted, development is still considered the nation's most pressing issue, though concern about water systems, AIDS, and tensions with Thailand also have moved onto the agenda. Development and poverty were most often when respondents were asked the biggest problem facing the country. "After saving, people are still poor." In rural areas, respondents spoke of hunger: "poor living standards and lack of rice to eat." Economic distress was seen as linked to the floods and drought had wracked Cambodian agriculture, the mainstay of the rural economy. "People are worried about floods when they produce crops." "Drought, [with the result that] people are poor, they have nothing to eat." One respondent cited HIV/AIDS, which did not come up in our previous study, as a national issue. (She was secondary-educated, which may suggest awareness is mainly among the elite. Most striking, a couple of interviewees referred to tensions with Thais (over border

issues and sales of gem-laden lands). This theme was another novelty in our late-December research, as our 2000 study found some hostility to Vietnamese, but not Thais. It foreshadowed the anti-Thai rioting which erupted Jan. 30.

At the local level, poverty remains the number one issue, but land disputes have erupted into public consciousness, water remains important, and crime fears seem less intense. Poverty, homelessness, and hunger were the most often-cited local problems in city and country ("poor living conditions and homelessness," "lack of food.") Poverty was considered linked to joblessness and landlessness ("Unemployment, particularly when the local population has increased but there is not enough land proportionately for rice farming.") Indeed, a surprise finding was that land disputes were mentioned almost as frequently as poverty as a local problem. These included land taken by from private individuals business ("the company confiscates land,") government ("our land was taken by the Rubber Research Institute, now I have no land to plant crops and no chance to earn money,") as well as illegal government land sales ("they sold land from the railway to become the fuel station.") Local water management problems were also cited, and seen as a cause of hunger ("lack of water – if they get ponds they can grow rice.") Crime also was mentioned as a problem, yet less often than two years ago, perhaps reflecting improved security.

THE 2003 NATIONAL ELECTIONS: CONFUSED ABOUT REGISTRATION, WILLING TO VOTE

Most of the Cambodians we interviewed had heard that National Assembly elections are planned, although only some were aware that the vote will take place in 2003. Almost all of those who knew of this year's vote had been to school; almost all the unschooled were unaware either of the vote or the date.

The major area of uncertainty about this year's vote concerned voter registration requirements. Most of those interviewed thought everyone would have to register again. "Yes, they need to register again. From age 18 until they cannot walk!" Some had no idea if Cambodians people would need to register. Only a few, all of whom

had been to school, believed that only those who had come of age or were previously unregistered would have to register – government's current plan. The participants themselves recognized that they did not know enough in this area: registration requirements were the main election-related topics on which they spontaneously requested more information. A few asked for details of the electoral process (date, place, and voting procedures) but the immediate priority for voter education appears to be explaining registration rules. Since the registration deadline is February 15, this should be done quickly. A deadline extension may be needed if the newly eligible do not register by then.

Registration aside, our respondents were all willing to participate in the 2003 election, for reasons including choice, resources, obedience to authority, and gifts. As in past Cambodian elections (1993, 1998, and 2002), where turnout rates were very high, there appears to be little need for "*get out the vote*" efforts to stimulate turnout. But the reasons for voting were quite varied. Some said their motivation was choosing leaders: "I will vote for whomever I like, but not for those I dislike." Others said that voting was a way to obtain development resources from the state. "Yes, I will vote, [because] I want our village improved – a road, a water pump for common use." Still others said they would vote in compliance with instructions from the authorities: "The village chief told me about the elections, so I will go vote." And one, from Phnom Penh, mentioned gifts from the parties as a motivation for voting. "I will vote as I will be given gifts or a motorbike. I need gifts such as rice."

SIGNS OF PROGRESS: 2002 ELECTIONS MORE CREDIBLE, POLITICAL TOLERANCE GREATER

The research also indicated some areas where programs to promote voter education, clean elections, and political tolerance appear to have achieved some success. Vote counting and election administration in Cambodia is beginning to gain public confidence, reflecting the reality of safeguards such as secret ballots, election observers, and counting reform, and efforts to teach voters about them. More remains to be done, for doubts remain concerning election fairness and there is little

awareness of what to do about irregularities, but a start has been made. There also seem to be gains in political tolerance, a key objective of civic education.

Our interviews suggested that electoral administration in Cambodia is becoming more credible in the eyes of the voters. Almost all the respondents said they thought there had been no cheating in their areas in the running of the 2002 commune elections. The registration process was said to have operated smoothly in almost all cases ("no trouble in my area.") The only exceptions were a case where recent arrivals were told to register in their former home village and another where illiterate Kampuchea Krom women were charged 5000 Riels for help with forms when Khmers were asked 500. Similar, the election-day process and the count were seen as flawless by almost all. The only exceptions were an allegation of underage voting and another of ballot switching. However, the general verdict was, "There was no cheating." This stands in sharp contrast to the expectations found in our last study, where voters worried about a litany of potential abuses in the commune elections, including registration problems and cheating in the count, and doubted the accuracy of the count in the 1998 National Assembly vote.[1]

There was evidence in the interviews that programs promoting voter education and cleaner elections have made a difference in how elections are perceived and run in Cambodia. Almost every respondent was confident about ballot secrecy. "Nobody knew who I voted for because my vote was secret." In 2000, we found some doubt on the subject. The near-unanimity on the subject today suggests voter education efforts on this theme prior to the commune elections worked. Efforts to establish election observation and monitoring networks were also noted by the voters we spoke with and cited as evidence that cheating would not be allowed. There was "no cheating, because one or another party had its observer, and they chose a monk as a neutral person." Counting votes at the polling place, which was instituted to reduce fraud in the count, also seems to have reassured electors. "During the vote counting, everyone from the different [party] milieus was present."

[1] It appears from the responses that when Cambodians are asked about "cheating" in elections, they understand the question as referring to election-day administration and the count, not the entire electoral process (including the campaign, media, intimidation, etc). This could explain why, in our 2000 poll, the proportion of voters who said there was no cheating was not the same as the proportion who thought the election was free and fair, although there were big overlaps between responses on those items. To obtain voters' assessment of all aspects of the election, it seems necessary to ask both questions.

Nonetheless, the Cambodians we interviewed have doubts about the fairness of the upcoming National Assembly elections: most said either that they feared there would be cheating during the vote or that they didn't know if there would be. Some worried about the effects of single-party control of election administration. "They could cheat because the one who organized the election originated from a party." Despite the reform of counting, some still feared possible cheating during the count as well. One respondent also mentioned rumors that lotion was available to wash off the ink marking the fingers of people who had voted. Those who felt there would not be cheating referred to the same factors as had prevented it during the commune elections – the secret ballot, presence of observers, and vote counting at the voting site.

Most voters interviewed also had no idea what to do if they saw election irregularities. This was particularly the case among women, older voters, and those with no education. Of the rest, a couple said they would report election cheating to the village authorities, one mentioned observers and one the National Election Committee. No one had a clear idea of who was organizing and running the elections. There was also fear of the potential consequences of reporting problems: one voter said, "I don't dare to complain." Telling people what to do if election problems occur – and helping give them the confidence to do it – remains an important priority for voter education.

Political tolerance appears to be a second area of progress. Almost all the Cambodians interviewed accepted that all political parties, including unpopular ones, should be allowed to hold meetings in their areas. "They should hold their meetings because this is their right, and we can't prevent them from organizing their meeting." "We have to allow all political parties to run meeting, because we will know more about what they talk to the people about in the village through their meetings."

Likewise, most of them also said they would accept a friend who supported another political party. "We could talk to each other and I could try to persuade her to my way of thinking, but I would not feel angry with my friend, because it is up to her to make up her mind." A few said they would be upset with a friend who chose another political option, but only a couple would end the friendships.

These are important changes, since our 2000 qualitative research reported a noteworthy degree of political intolerance, confirmed by the survey, which also found that a majority of Cambodians would end friendships with people backing parties other than theirs. They suggest civic education efforts to promote tolerance and reduce violence have helped, even if they may need reinforcement as elections approach. They may also reflect lessening tension, as inter-party violence has declined and memories of the war faded, since intolerance tended to be associated with fear of violent conflict.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS ELECTIONS: CAMBODIANS LIKE THEM BUT EXPECT LITTLE

Elections evoke seemingly paradoxical reactions from Cambodians. They participate in them, they say they like them – yet they don't feel they change much or expect much from them. These perceptions are reflected in their reactions to last year's local elections and the national ones coming this year.

Cambodians we interviewed had a positive attitude towards the 2002 commune elections: most called them as a good experience. The principal reason given was that the vote afforded an opportunity to choose local leaders. "It isn't different between the commune and national elections. It is good because people can choose someone they like." (This was also the major reason given for anticipating the elections given in our 2000 study.) The other factors cited were that the elections took place without violence and that people had a chance to participate. "Good elections. Good people were serving the people, conditions were safe, and people participated in the election activities." Many, however, were guarded in their comments ("I don't know," "ordinary," etc.) In Kompong Cham, one of the provinces

where the most pre-election violence was reported, a respondent simply said, "I have no feelings about the commune elections, because I didn't think about them at all." [2]

Yet not many respondents reported changes in their communes since the elections. "Before the elections came, the commune authority produced electoral propaganda. When people voted for them, they haven't paid attention to the people after the commune elections." "Everything has been the same because the new commune leader is the same as the old one." The few who had seen changes noted improvements in agricultural supplies ("paddy rice seeds and vegetables"), infrastructure ("water pump and canal,") and roads ("national road reconstruction,") as well as an end to political violence. The latter two were reported in Kompong Cham, which swung from an opposition majority in 1998 to a vote in 2002 for the ruling Cambodian People's Party.

Despite their willingness to participate in the National Assembly elections, Cambodian voters have low expectations for this year's vote as well. Most say they are looking forward to nothing at all about the elections or to nothing specific about them. Some are compliant ("I am looking forward to voting because I was told to vote," "I will go vote in the elections as others do") or seek to avoid conflict ("people want happiness and harmony.") Most think it will change nothing ("I lost hope, we don't have any rights," "they always break their promises,") or is merely symbolic ("they would make no difference, a good symbol however.") Those who did think they might make a difference spoke of the opportunity to choose ("I want to choose the people's representative, I want to elect the country's leader.") They also said candidates would promote development ("better human resources, education") deliver patronage ("dig wells, ponds, build roads, provide rice seeds,") and aid in settling disputes ("I will vote for the one who is helping us deal with our land disputes.")

THE ELECTORAL DISCONNECT: REPRESENTATIVES, RESOURCES, AND VOTES

[2] On political violence during the commune election campaign, generally and in Kompong Cham, see Human Rights Watch, "Cambodia's Commune Elections: Setting the Stage for the 2003 National Elections," April 2002.

The key to these electors' low expectations regarding those they elect seems to lie in their perceptions and knowledge of representative institutions. There is little connection for Cambodian voters between their votes and the policy and composition of government. The political parties seem to be an undifferentiated blur to them. They relate rather to individual Members of the National Assembly, who they see as sources of government patronage. Elections are seen as means for voicing demands for these scarce resources, which are sometimes met, but not as mechanisms for controlling or changing governments. In these circumstances, low expectations for elections are not very surprising. At the same time, with a dominant party consolidated and challenges to policy or changes of government almost unimaginable, overt electoral coercion appears steadily less necessary, which may be associated with the decline in reports of electoral violence from election to election in Cambodia.

Most of the Cambodians interviewed did not perceive differences between the parties in the National Assembly. "I know there's an opposition, but citizens know nothing" [about it.] "I see no differences. Nothing different between the parties." Those who say differences did not cite any on ideological or policy lines. The principal difference noted was in their strength and power: "One party has more and another has fewer members. In this area [Kompong Speu,] CPP has the most members." A couple of respondents noted differences in the responsiveness and seriousness of parties. "Some political party members have a sense of justice." "One party is concerned about development, while another party exists only in name."

The individual members of the National Assembly drew much stronger responses than did the parties: most of the voters we spoke with think they are responsive to requests for resources. "When we propose to them doing something, they pay attention. When we do not have enough food to eat, when we need roads, they provide us with what we need and propose." "They care about the people's proposals on dams and construction and they don't break their promises." "They are representatives. They build schools, pumps, kindergartens." But there are only a couple of references in the interviews to parliamentarians as representing ideas. "Sometimes they care about the people's views." Some respondents felt that Assembly members ignored their constituents. "They're not interested in people's problems." "They never, even once, come to see us as you do now." In short, representation is

essentially seen as delivering patronage resources, with National Assembly members serving as patronage brokers.[3]

There was almost no awareness of the functions of the National Assembly beyond providing patronage. Almost none of the voters we interviewed were aware that the Assembly's responsibilities include passing laws, electing the Prime Minister, or questioning Ministers. "We have never seen them. How can we know about them? We do not know any of the duties of the officials." The sole role of the body of which most were aware was helping constituents solve problems and obtain scarce resources. "The members of the National Assembly are building roads, schools, wells, latrines, but not in our areas." "I think Members of the National Assembly didn't do anything besides solving the problems of people relating to poverty. They help people to solve problems such as floods. But not all people were helped because there are many poor people." The image of politics that emerges is an extremely personalistic one, in which individuals and their relationships matter far more than institutions and their roles.

In this context, it is not surprising that the Cambodian voters interviewed did not feel elections gave them an opportunity to control the government; at best they felt the vote provides an opportunity to demand resources from candidates. Most simply could not see a way in which elections could impose constraints on government. "I think the election helps us control government, but I don't really know about elections." Many of them did see elections as a way to tell representatives what they wanted. "It is the way to push elected people to construct roads, schools, and canals." "They help to voice things in some ways." But even this limited notion of representation was more than most could come up with.

While a few interviewees associated democracy with freedom, when asked about connections between elections and democracy, almost none could cite one. "I don't know how to answer." "I feel stupid when you ask me about it." The notion dear to Western theorists since Schumpeter – that democracy involves free, competitive elections that alternate elites in power – was absent from the thinking of

[3] This is very similar to the role found for parliamentarians in Kenya in Joel Barkan and John Okumu, Politics and Public Policy in Kenya and Tanzania.

Cambodians we interviewed.[4] Indeed, when asked about the idea of voting against government to show discontent with it, respondents were frightened and thought the interviewers were agitators. "I don't think it's right. 'I will work for someone who gives me food to eat' [a Khmer proverb.]" "I think this is stirring up trouble." As long as voters find the notion of a change of government, or even control of government, through elections unthinkable, direct political coercion may be increasingly unnecessary as a dominant party is increasingly consolidated.

These findings suggest a further role for voter education and democratic development programs, now that elections per se are fairly well-established in Cambodia: strengthening the electoral connection. The next stage involves giving more content to the institutions of electoral politics themselves. One aspect of this would be explaining the major functions of the National Assembly (electing the executive, legislation, administrative oversight), so that voters can see it is more than a set of individuals who deliver resources. If voters were more aware of what the Assembly can do, then developing the parties' voter contact abilities and differentiating their messages might make it possible for them to inject some issues and ideas into electoral politics.

Another aspect would be promoting direct contact between representatives or candidates and the represented, through question and answer sessions in villages and towns, on radio, and on TV. Voters can be encouraged to use these forums and elections in general to press demands on their representatives. It might also be possible for NGOs to encourage voters to make more issue-based choices by distributing non-partisan voter guides summarizing the parties' stances on different topics. Finally, the notion that elections offer a chance for ordinary voters to speak to and influence government, regarding both policy and patronage, is an idea that voter education can promote.

[4] This conception of democracy comes from Joseph Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy.

FEAR: AN IMPORTANT DETERMINANT IN CAMBODIAN POLITICS

Fear of reprisals for dissent remains a significant fact of Cambodian political life, to judge by the comments of our interviewees. We found a lot of fear and caution among those with whom we spoke in 2000 and similar feelings came out this time. "No way, I dare not [complain,] as the government is powerful." "No [problems face Cambodia,] if I saw any I would tell you about it." Most of these comments came up in response to questions on other issues: in contrast to our earlier study, there was general reluctance to acknowledge political fears when directly asked about them. Still, a few respondents were outspoken about fears in their areas. For instance, when asked about the commune elections, a secondary-educated respondent in Kompong Cham said, "The illiterate people were worried. Some people are strong and others not. It was quite easy for someone to attract the latter to do something for them or to use any form of intimidation."

To some extent, we were fishing in troubled waters by interviewing in Kompong Cham, but we found evidence of fear elsewhere as well. Kompong Cham was chosen as a research site precisely because there were more reports of intimidation and vote buying there than in other areas. We did indeed find that the less-educated participants from that province evinced a lot of fear and caution on many questions. For instance, one said, "I don't know how I feel about elections. I don't think about the 2003 elections. If the village chief tells me the date of the elections I will go vote." Another asked about voting against the government, said, "I think that is not good. We cannot be not satisfied. They are the high authority." Yet even in the other provinces where we interviewed and Phnom Penh, some people voiced nervousness about challenging authority. Thus, a resident of Dangkor district said, "Even though I did not vote for a particular party I dare not say anything." (One of the issues for our poll pre-testing will be finding question wordings that let people acknowledge fears in their areas, or at least which encourage them to say "don't know" rather than to deny fears when they exist.)

Still, there is evidence that fear, though widespread, is not all-pervasive, and there may be opportunities for civic education programs to diminish it. It was striking that in the wake of the local elections – where local grievances received a legitimate

forum for expression – there were now references to local controversies, particularly land disputes, which had been absent from our discussions in 2000. This suggests that civic education could seek to create opportunities that make it safer to speak out, safe spaces where freer expression can develop. One possibility is public speak-out meetings to discuss problems in villages or towns, particularly for women (see below). Another is creating public spaces or bulletin boards where ideas or messages can be posted, like the famous "democracy wall" in Beijing in the past. A higher-tech response would be buying time for call-in shows on radio or TV. While access to such shows is obviously limited to people with phones, they have succeeded in broadening the bounds of political discourse in transitional societies such as South Africa.

STOPPING VOTE SELLING: MOBILIZING THE POWER OF SHAME

Our respondents struggled with a moral dilemma over the practice of giving money and gifts in exchange for votes: they think vote selling is wrong, but so is breaking your word. As one put it, "Giving or receiving a bribe like this is not good. Taking money from someone and you do not vote for them, that is also not good." They also feel the tug of practical needs – how can very poor people not accept money or gifts, even if it is wrong? "Poor people who accept money are certainly not vote sellers. Although they take money from one party they will still vote for a party they like. So we cannot say these people are selling their vote."

The Cambodian voters we interviewed seemed ashamed to admit that vote selling occurs in their areas, yet they acknowledged it several times in our study. When they were asked directly if it took place in their villages during the commune elections, only one, our secondary educated woman in Kompong Cham, said it had. (The others interviewed there denied it, even though there were widespread reports of gifts and payments in their province.) A few others said it had happened in other villages ("this has happened in the neighboring village," "people in neighboring villages were given gifts") or to other people ("not to me, but I know of one, he said so.") But several of those who denied that gifts were given where they lived

mentioned them in electoral contexts answering other questions. "When they give me a shirt, a hat, I will vote for them." "Distribution of small gifts" is part of elections (this from a Kompong Cham respondent who said it hadn't occurred in her area). "I will vote as I would be given gifts or a motorbike. I need gifts such as rice." Another referred to the distribution of MSG by parties to spice up election-time meals. (Again, we need to find question wordings that let people recognize money and gift giving where it occurred, or at least not deny it.)

To explore their attitudes on the topic in more detail, we presented interviewees with a set of five statements about vote selling and asked them for reactions.

Most of the voters we spoke with rejected the first two arguments, although with varying degrees of ambivalence, as responses to the other questions showed.

- *"If you accept money or a gift from a party, you are morally bound to vote for that party."*

  Most respondents felt that even if they took money, they could still vote for the party of their choice. "It depends on me. I can accept the money and vote for whomever I want." The impropriety of paying for votes outweighed the obligation of the promise to vote for the buyer. "I think it is a bribe." "This pressures people." However, some felt the buying of votes was a binding transaction. "We receive the money to vote for the party so we must vote for it. They hire us to vote for their party."

- *"You might as well vote for the party that has the power and give you money, the others have no chance anyway."*

  Most Cambodians interviewed felt this was too cynical. Some were quite eloquent: "I think that sometimes no money and no power cannot win, and sometimes money and power also cannot win," said a 47-year-old woman with no schooling. "The rich and powerful dominate the poor. I think this is wrong. Voting is the right of the voter. They should not force the voter," said a 50-year-old primary-schooled man A couple of participants gave an equally cynical reply: they would vote for a party that gave them money if they liked it. "The poor take money from a party and vote for someone that they like." A few agreed with the statement.

Some said it was realistic: "the party that has power and gives money will win the elections." Others felt wealth and development go together. "I have to vote for the party that has money and power. Their activities are towards development and progress."

Two other statements split the participants.

- *"You should refuse to accept money from a party. It's just wrong, it's selling your vote."*

Many agreed with this statement. "I think it's right. Selling your vote is not good. It's better not to accept money." Some of those who agreed did so because they felt that accepting money obligated the recipient. "When I am given money I will do something according to the donor's will. If we take money from someone we should vote for them." However, many also disagreed with the statement, arguing that it was acceptable to take money from a party that one supports. "It is not good, because, provided the party is good, people will vote for it." "When you take their money you must do their work. Taking money from the party you like is OK. Taking money from the party you don't like is selling your vote."

- *"Your vote is your secret. If poor people need money and take it, they can still vote for whoever they like. No one can find out."*

Although many participants agreed with this, many others did not. Those who agreed felt it responded to the reality of poverty in Cambodia. "This statement is really good, because the poor people need money to support their living expenses. They would have to accept the money to deal with their urgent problems, but they can still vote for whatever parties they support." Yet those who take money from a party they will not support seemed dishonest to many other respondents. "I feel they are not good people. They take money from this party but vote for another party."

Looking across the reactions to all four statements, two points stand out. One is that there was no consensus behind any of the statements. Opinions on different aspects of vote selling were quite divided among the Cambodian voters with whom

we spoke. The other is that individuals themselves were not fully consistent in their reactions. For instance, some of those who agreed with the last statement, that voters could accept money and vote their conscience, also agreed with the third, that taking money was simply wrong. These inconsistencies are further evidence of the conflict playing out within as well as between voters on this issue.

A possible strategic response for voter education was suggested by reactions to our fifth and last statement: *"If your children knew you took money to vote for a party, they would be ashamed of you for selling their future."* Most of our participants agreed with this statement – including several who had condoned taking money from parties in response to some of the earlier ones. This argument seems to tap into the shame which is associated with accepting money for a vote. "Children could get angry, as when they grow up they could think, 'Because of my father's vote, we are in this situation. My father does not think about our future. He only thinks about money.'" "Exactly. It would be selling their future." However, some insisted that it was only wrong to take money from a party they disliked. "If we took money from a bad party it could make our children's future bad."

CIVIL SOCIETY: A HUNGER FOR ASSOCIATION

The Cambodians we interviewed were quite interested in belonging to associations. As we know from our previous survey, civil society is quite weak in Cambodia, with a fairly small proportion of the population belonging to associations. This was mirrored in our study this time: most of the respondents did not belong to organizations. (Those who did included members of religious groups, death societies, school parents groups, micro-finance associations, and women's groups.) However, many of those who did not belong to any groups were interested in joining one. This was particularly true among rural respondents.

Cambodians expressed several motivations were expressed for joining groups. One was mutual aid in times of hardship, such as the benefits paid by organizations such as death societies. "I would join one because we can raise money for poor villagers when they pass away or have an illness." Another was working together to

resolve problems in the community. "They would make progress, help us to deal with issues." Education and information was another reason why groups such as women's associations were sought after. "It was good to create the women's association, because they explain to women about family problems or social realities."

THE GENDER AGENDA: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, HEALTH, AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

When we asked our respondents what issues women faced in their areas, the Cambodian women we interviewed had a clear agenda of their own – and one that was different from the one men thought they had. Poverty was the issue the women mentioned most often, hardly surprisingly in Cambodia's circumstances, and it was the only issue men thought women cared about. But the women brought up two other issues almost as often: domestic violence ("most women have been beaten by their drunken husbands in this area") and health (including reproductive health and AIDS). One also mentioned education for women.

Almost all the women favored women-only public meetings or speak-outs to discuss women's problems, while men were divided on the question. The women hoped such gatherings would help them solve their problems ("it is right as only women could deal properly with their own problems, without men's involvement.") They also hoped women's meetings would help them overcome their hesitations about speaking publicly when men were around. "They cannot talk about their problems related to being women when men also participating in the meeting." Topics they hoped the meetings would address included women's health, domestic violence, family issues, and jobs and development. Some of the men were comfortable with the idea of women meeting on their own. Others were suspicious, doubting women could solve their own problems. "Women are weak. All women meeting without men is not good."

More participation by women in Cambodian politics was supported by almost all the voters we interviewed. Every one of the women was in favor, as were most of

the men. Their reasons most often included helping women ("I want to see women have full education and progress, then their husbands cannot abuse them") and promoting gender equality ("I'd like women not to be looked down upon by men.") Others cited included empowering women ("I would like to see women more active and less fearful,") women's lesser aggressiveness ("women are cooler than men, they don't get angry so fast,") and promoting development ("that is the way the country will develop.") The one objector complained that political involvement could take women away from their families. "The family will have difficulty."

Most of the participants also supported the one-third quota for women proposed for legislative candidate lists in Cambodia. It was seen as a way of promoting equality for women in politics. "I want women to think about the problems of the country, they should not only work in the kitchen. The Cambodian saying related to this is, 'Women cannot turn around the stove.'" [e.g. women cannot do hard work as well as men.] "Women have good ideas to lead the country and leadership needs men and women, because they always say, 'Seedlings depend on the rice field and men depend on women.' It means that working successfully needs both men and women." On this issue, too, all the women were in favor – one even suggested a 50% quota. The only hesitation came from a couple of the men.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Since time to the July elections is short, we will spell out some of the strategic implications of our findings for voter and civic education work in Cambodia. Obviously, since this is qualitative rather than quantitative research, our results cannot simply be projected to the larger population. But we believe our interviewees are typical of Cambodian voters, based on their diversity in region, gender, age, and education, as well as the close relationship between our qualitative and quantitative results in 2000. For that reason, we offer these preliminary strategic suggestions for consideration. A fuller strategy, with details on target groups and media for implementation, will come from our upcoming national survey.

We think a phased approach would be appropriate, unfolding in the following stages:

Immediately: Registration information campaign

- We saw that few interviewees understood who does (or does not) need to register for this election. Experience in Cambodia and Indonesia suggests the national surveys will confirm this finding. Since the registration deadline is February 15, we cannot wait for the survey results before beginning an effort to inform voters about registration rules. It may be necessary to extend the deadline if the word is not out by then.

March-April: Phase One

- Civic education: goals in this period would include interpersonal political tolerance, information about the functions of the National Assembly (legislation, electing the PM, questioning Ministers), and promoting women's political equality.

- Voter education goals would include promoting electoral accountability (encouraging voters to use campaigns as opportunities to voice demands to candidates). These could include meetings where voters question candidates, radio and TV shows where studio audiences and phone callers can do the same. Women voters and candidates could be included in these general sessions and given special platforms of their own as well.

May-July: Phase Two

This period would focus on voter education, specifically:

- explaining how the vote can be used to choose among parties on issues (this could include NGO distribution of non-partisan voter guides comparing party stands, radio and TV broadcasts doing the same, and slogans and messages urging that advocating this is not agitation).

- campaigning against vote selling – using slogans and targets to be developed through our upcoming poll to mobilize shame against accepting money or gifts for votes from any party, even the parties voters prefer.

- promoting tolerance of opposing parties and reducing inter-party violence, including information on how to complain about irregularities