



Cambodian Public Opinion in Advance of the 2003 Elections

A report to the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs on
Focus Groups conducted in Cambodia
January 2003

Introduction

Six months before the July 2003 national elections, focus group participants hold conflicting attitudes about their lives and the state of the country. Participants in a set of 12 focus groups held throughout the country in January tended to express satisfaction with many of the changes they had experienced over the past few years – namely peace, and the expansion of development projects in local communities. At the same time, the participants are vocal about aspects of the country that disturb them. They complain that salaries do not keep up with inflation, crime and drug use are rampant, government corruption is pervasive, education is often a privilege of the rich, and the justice system favors those with resources to influence the system.

The CPP, the dominant party in the government coalition, benefits from the tendency to associate the government's public works projects with the ruling party. In nearly every focus group, participants interchangeably credit the central government and the CPP for infrastructure improvements. When the Prime Minister adds political campaign messages to the dedications of these projects, as noted in a recent NDI pre-election assessment statement, the lines between party and government are further blurred.

Participants in the focus groups show a high respect for opposition leader Sam Rainsy, viewing him as courageous and honest. At the same time, these participants tend to fault opposition forces for not providing the services that the CPP does and question their promises as a result. Most participants do not evaluate the political parties on an ideological basis; rather, they judge the parties based on how much the organizations have provided tangible benefits at the local level.

Under these circumstances, opposition parties, such as the Sam Rainsy Party, suffer from a political Catch-22: They cannot provide public services because they do not have the political power or control the resources to do so. At the same time, they face the challenge of garnering support without the capacity to offer something tangible to local communities. FUNCINPEC is faced with the equally difficult challenge of neither receiving credit for the benefits attributed to the CPP-led central government nor being seen by Cambodians as an opposition party by virtue of its status as a coalition partner with the CPP.

These dilemmas faced by the leading opposition parties are, in part, a function of Cambodia's underdevelopment, both political and economic, as well as Cambodia having been a one-party state from 1979 to 1992 and dominated by the CPP since then. For example, providing gifts, even at election time, is seen as perfectly appropriate. The citizens have basic needs, and the government can meet them by distributing money or goods. The secret ballot, and an electoral process monitored by political party and international observers, gives voters the impression that the exchange is above board. "No one tells us how to vote," said a number of people in the groups.

Public confidence in the electoral process appears to be high, based on the focus group discussions. While Phnom Penh participants believe that voter intimidation is widespread in the countryside (a view shared by the activists interviewed by the NDI pre-election assessment delegation), participants outside the capital perceive that Cambodia's recent elections have been fair and free of intimidation, while acknowledging that there have been attempts to improperly influence the outcome.

These are among the principal findings of the 12 focus groups that Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research oversaw in six Cambodian provinces in mid-January. The following report explores each of these conclusions, and others, in greater depth.

Methodology

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQR) conducted 12 focus groups in Cambodia from January 14-21, with two groups each in the provinces of Phnom Penh, Takeo, Battambang, Siem Reap, Kampong Cham and Kandal. Asian Strategies, a research firm based in Singapore, organized the groups, which were moderated by two Cambodian researchers. GQR Associate Vice President Mark Feierstein observed eight of the groups, in a separate room beyond the view of the participants.

Participants for each group were selected based on particular criteria. In addition to the demographic specifications of each group – gender, age and socio-economic – the participants for each session held certain common political views or had exhibited comparable electoral behavior. [The specifications for each group are in Appendix I.] These specifications were ambitious and were no different than those used in developed countries, including the United States. GDR was prepared to ease the standards in Cambodia if recruiting for the groups had been too difficult, but that proved unnecessary.

The discussion guidelines [Appendix II] for the moderators were also no less ambitious than might be employed in the United States or any other country. The moderators asked open-ended questions on a range of issues and probed the participants' views extensively. The moderators never felt that they had to simplify the discussion. Most of the focus group participants were knowledgeable and opinionated.

Despite the novelty of the experience for participants and the sensitivity of some of the subject matter, the participants mostly appeared comfortable and sounded candid. The moderators stressed repeatedly that they represented no particular party or institution, that there were no right or wrong answers, that everyone was free to speak their minds, and that their anonymity would be respected. While researchers can never be sure if and when respondents censor or tailor their opinions, we detected little hesitancy (with the notable exception of the monks in Kampong Cham) among the participants to adopt dissident views or speak critically about individuals and institutions. Having said that, as discussed in this report, there were times when the participants were less candid, particularly when they tried to explain why they had not voted in some elections.

The focus groups provided valuable information and insights about public opinion in Cambodia. While qualitative research such as this has limitations, the small samples of participants for each group were purposefully chosen from particular regions, were comprised of defined demographic groups and had exhibited certain political behavior, which enabled us to explore the views of key political constituencies. Although this information does not provide a statistical certainty, it does provide us with a strong indication of the public's attitudes on a range of issues, as well as the basis and rationale for those views. This research methodology has been used by leading political parties around the world as a critical factor in determining successful campaign messages.

FINDINGS

Painful Past Casts Present in Positive Light

Many of the focus group participants have a fairly positive outlook about their lives and the state of the country. Because of the hardships endured in the past, they are grateful for the absence of war and the economic and political progress, however limited at times, that the country has made.

Peace: The participants in the focus groups are particularly pleased that the country is largely at peace today. For many, the contrast is so stark with the violent and tumultuous 1970s and 1980s that they ask for little more than to continue to live in peace.

It is good enough to live without war. (Woman, Takeo, age 25-34)

Previously we suffered from conflict, but now we are okay with each other. So it is really wrong [to talk about negative things.] (Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

Previously I remember the oppression. ... We were forced to be soldiers and paid taxes, worked on farming land, and didn't even have cattle to carry us to the market. And after the election in 1993, we became free and had the right to go anywhere. No one forced us to be soldiers any more, so we had time to earn a living and then we got better and better. (Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

Democracy and freedom: The participants take satisfaction with what they see as the increasing freedom in the country over the past 10 years. The three elections that have taken place since 1993 are the most evident manifestation of the country's democratic advances and have produced what one opinion leader in Phnom Penh called a "free multiparty democracy."

We have freedom to live. (Woman, Kampong Cham, age 35-49)

...democracy is infiltrating more and more so people can understand more. People understand about their rights and freedom. (Monk, Kampong Cham, age 30-50)

With elections, we now have rights and freedom. Everything can be done easier. We can talk and express our feelings more openly. (Woman, Kandal, age 35-49)

Now we can vote like people in other lawful and advanced countries. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

Most of the participants express satisfaction with how the recent elections have been conducted, saying the processes have been fair and transparent and have taken place in an environment free of intimidation.

It's good because they are counting votes in front of the people, so they can see the results. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

The election meant that all the people in the country could vote without being threatened. They were free to go and to vote for the one they preferred. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

The participants credit election observers, both foreign and domestic, with ensuring the integrity of the elections and the secrecy of the ballot.

There are people who we can see that make sure that the activities are legitimate. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

There were opposition representatives, and there were inspectors. Nothing out of the ordinary happened. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

(Despite these positive assessments, the participants also make clear, albeit indirectly and unintentionally at times, that the electoral process is far from perfect. Below, we go into greater detail about differing perceptions of the process and discuss some of the more questionable practices that the parties, particularly the CPP, are said to engage in.)

The individuals with whom we spoke appreciate democracy not only for its intrinsic merits, but because they believe it has also contributed to the country's economic development.

When we did not have elections during the People's Republic of Kampuchea, the roads and houses and people's living conditions were not progressing. But later, when we adhered to democratic principles and had a constitutional monarchy and free elections, we can see that our economy is becoming better. (Monk, Kampong Cham, age unavailable)

If we have freedom, making a living is also easier. (Woman, Kandal, age 25-34)

Development: Given the circumstances that the country has emerged from, many of the focus group participants have very low standards and expectations for the country's development and are grateful for any evidence of economic progress.

Since 1979, we had nothing and now we have something. We see cars, motorbikes. There are many of them. (Woman, Battambang, age 35-49)

I can see the nice roads, lots of schools. The country is more advanced; It's not the same as before. (Woman, Kampong Cham, age 35-49)

For most of the participants, the most tangible signs of economic progress have been the development projects in their local communities. In nearly every group, participants rattled off a list of projects that have been completed near their homes in the past few years, including schools, hospitals, wells, roads and pagodas.

Now the roads system is more efficient. Bridges and canals have been built for the people. Schools and pagodas are newly built. (Woman, Siem Reap, age 35-49)

We are grateful for the hospitals in the countryside. There aren't so many yet, but they are progressing, so we are very happy. (Woman, Kampong Cham, age 35-49)

The schools, for example -- when I go anywhere, I can see they are now built nicely with concrete. Previously the school walls and roofs were thatched with palm leaves. Also, we have hospitals in the districts and villages that allow people to be cured more easily than before. And the NGOs help by donating roads, so the economy makes progress too. (Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

Frustrations with Standard of Living and Rule of Law

Despite their satisfaction with the progress that their country has made, many of the focus group participants are disappointed that their own personal material conditions have not improved measurably. There is also profound dissatisfaction with the state of the rule of law in the country, encompassing rising crime and drug use, pervasive corruption, and a dysfunctional court system. Frustration also abounds over the education system, which is seen to be rife with corruption and too costly for poor families.

Economy: Focus group participants are frustrated that poverty persists in spite of the country's economic growth. They complain that the rich seem to be getting richer, while the poor are no better off. The focus group participants observe that no matter how hard they work, they do not earn enough money to buy necessities.

The poor are always poor. Those who have money are moving ahead. We have no money; we are moving backward. (Woman, Battambang, age 35-49)

If we do find work, we still do not have money to spend. (Man, Battambang, age 18-25)

Wages are low and the cost of goods is high, so in order to live, we must look for several jobs. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

...the rich reach the sky, while the poor have absolutely nothing. Even some of us coming here today wouldn't have had the money to pay for the transport. I've never known the feeling of good Khmer clothes. I have difficulty just meeting my daily living expenses. (Woman, Kandal, age 25-34)

Crime: Focus group participants are particularly disturbed about the rapid increase in crime. The empathy for the economic plight of criminals that often accompanies denunciations of criminal acts in other countries is nearly absent in Cambodia. The focus group participants are simply angry about being crime victims and frustrated that criminals do not serve long sentences.

Our society is plagued by robbers and crime, and today the people are really scared. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

We cannot sleep well because we are concerned about the robbers. They could cause trouble for us at night. (Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

We saw them enter the prison for two, three days and then they came out again almost immediately. That is the big problem. (Man, Battambang, age unavailable)

Jail them for five years, or forever. (Woman, Takeo, age 25-34)

Drugs: The participants are also dismayed about the increase in drug use, including glue sniffing, among children and give strong backing to a proposal to incarcerate for a minimum of five years anyone who sells drugs to minors.

Children are crazy nowadays. They are now very daring. At the age of 10, they are ready to fight and experiment. (Woman, Takeo, age 25-34)

I want the police to arrest the drug dealers, because I see many children sniffing glue, which turns them into thieves. (Woman, Siem Reap, age 18-24)

Corruption: Complaints about corruption abound. Officials at all levels throughout the government are accused of extorting money in exchange for carrying out their duties.

They [the government] help, but only if you have money. It works like that. (Woman, Siem Reap, age 18-24)

Everything requires money – even forms that should be provided free to everyone, but we still need to pay three or four thousand riels. They exploit even small amounts of money. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

The participants believe that corruption hinders the country's development and that curbing it is the key to the country's development.

...everything would be good if we had no more corruption. (Woman, Kampong Cham, age 35-49)

I will never be upset, even though I'm poor, as long as corruption is eliminated. (Woman, Takeo, age 25-34)

I think that if our country can eliminate corruption, nothing would be difficult – the natural resources, land, water, borders south and north. Because of corruption, there is selling of land, exploitation, sex trafficking and kidnapping. If corruption can be eliminated, that would be enough for me. (Woman, Kandal, age 25-34)

As a sign of the intense concern about corruption, the most popular of 18 proposals that we tested in the focus groups was to prosecute and jail corrupt officials. Another proposal that garnered significant backing was requiring senior government officials to declare their assets upon taking office and again when they leave office.

Sometimes we see the salaries of the commune leaders and they get 100,000 riels. They are in office for just five years, and they have villas and land. Where does he get the money from if he is just the commune leader? (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

For example, one says that he has worked for over five years, and he owns some properties, but I think that these properties should be transferred back to the state, because those properties are bought with corrupt money. (Woman, Takeo, age 25-35)

Justice System: Focus group participants believe that little progress is made in combating corruption and crime because of a judicial system that is rife with corruption itself and that favors those with the resources to influence officials.

Presently, if you want to find justice in Cambodia, you cannot find it. (Woman, Kandal, age 25-34)

When people go to court, those who have money always win. (Man, Battambang, age 18-25)

There is a lot of discrimination against the poor. They do not have any money to bribe the court officials. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

Education: Concerns about corruption extend to the education system as well, as underpaid teachers demand bribes to give students passing grades.

...when students take their exams, they always have to pay bribes. ...,only the rich children can study at a high level while the children of the poor and rural communities cannot continue to the higher level because of corruption. (Monk, Kampong Cham, age 30-50)

Some schools have forced the students to pay. If they don't pay, they will fail the exams. If they don't pay for their studies, the teachers won't allow them to pass to the next grade. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

Because of the seeming necessity to pay off teachers, as well as the high costs associated with sending a child to school, public or private, the participants complain that many poor families are unable to pay for their children's studies.

If our children have no money, our children will not be allowed to enter classes. (Woman, Battambang, age 35-49)

Sometimes the poor students are excellent, but they are unable to attend school the same as the others. (Woman, Kampong Cham, age 35-49)

As a result, there is strong support for a proposal to provide stipends to enable students to attend school.

Nowadays, only children of the rich can go to university. If they apply this policy, the poor students, the children of the poor could also compete with each other at university. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

Differing Perceptions about Electoral Process

In spite of the overall satisfaction with and pride about the country's recent elections, there appear to be differing perceptions about the process between residents of the capital and the rest of the country, or at least varying degrees of willingness to speak about problems. In Phnom Penh, the focus group participants speak freely about efforts by party officials to influence the outcome of elections. Some female supporters of Sam Rainsy in Phnom Penh complained about efforts to intimidate voters in the 1998 national elections and to deter people from voting in the 2002 commune elections.

[In 1998] [T]hey collected our names and they wanted to know which party we would vote for. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

During the elections in 2002, many factories did not let the workers out to go and vote. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

My sister works at a factory. She said that the factory took away her election card. They allowed only an afternoon for the workers to vote, but they were too far away from the polling stations. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

These women suggested that such efforts did not have much of an impact in the cities; but they and the opinion leaders in Phnom Penh (as well as many activists and party leaders interviewed by NDI's pre-election assessment delegation) believe that in the countryside, intimidation and vote buying, particularly by the CPP, is widespread and does affect the process.

In the remote areas, there was pressure on the people to vote. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

The people in the provinces are ignorant ... Many were told to vote for the party [CPP.] (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

...in 2002, there was vote buying everywhere – hundreds of cases such as providing books, paying for sugar cane juice, paying for hair cuts. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

I think he [Hun Sen] wins the election because he cheats those people. Sometimes he uses money as a bribe and promises to give something back. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

Some of the participants outside Phnom Penh acknowledge that parties, namely the CPP, try to buy votes.

There were gifts in 1998. It was a t-shirt. (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

There was no money, but they had shorts, sarong. (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

The village chief distributed them. (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

There was someone from the Cambodian People's Party who walked from door-to-door asking people to vote for them and then they would give them gifts. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

I heard older people say that if we voted for CPP, we got money. They got 3,000 or 5,000 riels. (Man, Battambang, age 18-25)

But everyone insists that the efforts have no impact on the vote because the ballot is secret.

It is a secret ballot, but the village chief is in charge. He contacted the people and told the people where to vote. We got the money, and we voted for anyone because no one will know which party we voted for. (Man, Battambang, age 18-25)

They give us money, but they will not know whom we vote for because we go inside alone to vote. If we like any party, we just vote for it. The money is already taken. (Man, Battambang, age 18-35)

It is not a problem. If the people are educated, they cannot be easily bought. (Monk, Kampong Cham, age 30-50)

The participants insist that voters are not intimidated into casting ballots for other than their own personal choice.

Now there are fewer threats than before. ... There is a decline in repression, compared to past elections. ... The people understand more and more. (Monk, Kampong Cham, age 30-50)

The room is closed for us to check off whichever candidate we want, and there was no pressure from any party. (Woman, Siem Reap, age 18-24)

They also express confidence that this year's election will be free and fair, largely because they believe the political parties will be in a position to verify the process.

I think that the election will be free and fair as all parties will be represented in the polling center to control things. (Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

As this quote demonstrates, enabling domestic agents to monitor the elections is an important factor in giving credibility to the elections. In the UN-organized elections

of 1993 and in the 1998 elections held by Cambodians themselves, ballots were counted at the district level. In the 2002 commune council elections, ballots were counted at the polling station level. Both approaches have merit, the former reducing the possibility of retribution aimed at specific villages that vote one way or another, the latter making it easier for domestic agents referred to in the previous quote to monitor the process.

If there is one practice that increases confidence in the fairness of the elections, it is the counting of the ballots at each polling site. The focus groups suggest a public preference for this approach at this time.

If we think that the National Election Committee is biased, we need to count the ballots immediately after the voting. (Man, Battambang, age 18-25)

In order to make the elections free and fair, they must count the ballots and publish the results immediately. They must count immediately and show the result to the public rather than keeping it for several days and then informing later. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

Other voters, however, put particular faith in the international observers.

If we have only Khmer people, they cannot be trusted. International supervision is more reliable. Because Cambodians, when they are given money, they can change the ballot and change the results. (Man, Battambang, age 18-25)

Based on the focus groups, it is evident that parties try to influence the vote through gifts, if not other forms of vote buying. It is impossible, though, to evaluate the impact of this effort to buy votes. A voter, even in the most comfortable of focus group environments, is not likely to acknowledge that his or her vote was effectively purchased with a gift.

In Assessing the Parties, All Politics is Local

The ideological or programmatic distinctions among the parties are clear to the focus group participants. For instance, while many can identify personal characteristics of Sam Rainsy and his party, few can identify the Sam Rainsy Party's platform. Even in an era when ideology is increasingly less pertinent, the non-ideological nature of Cambodian politics, at least as perceived by the focus group participants, is striking. Not once in our 12 focus groups did someone refer to one of the Cambodian parties in ideological terms. To the participants in the groups, there is little if anything that distinguishes the various party platforms. "They all promise the same things," was a common refrain in the groups.

The parties are judged then based on what they are perceived to do for local communities, granting an enormous advantage to the CPP, with its nationwide network and access to state resources. For most participants, the CPP delivers, while the other parties are largely absent.

CPP Takes Advantage of Incumbency: As noted above, many Cambodians are grateful for the development projects in their communities, and they acknowledge the CPP for providing them. Every new school, clinic, road or well is another point in the CPP and Hun Sen's favor.

His [Hun Sen's] leadership has led to prosperity from nothing. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

Hun Sen is leading us into prosperity by building roads, bridges, pagodas, schools and hospitals. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

Roads, schools, hospitals and everything else are due to his [Hun Sen's] leadership. (Man, Takeo, age 35-55)

Many focus group participants believe that Hun Sen is genuinely interested in helping people and concerned about the poor.

[The public] gets a lot of information not only at election time, but throughout the year in the name of the prime minister. He has the ability to do this, as he goes around the country and promotes himself in his role as prime minister. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

In my village, the very old people were visited by Hun Sen, and for this, I'm grateful to him. (Woman, Kampong Cham, age 35-49)

He assisted the people by giving out aid, sarongs, rice, canned fish, scarves, mats. (Woman, Takeo, age 25-34)

With these local projects, the CPP and Hun Sen have earned a level of credibility that other parties and leaders lack. Because the CPP is seen to have already helped the people, its campaign pledges are greeted with less skepticism.

I think he [Hun Sen] is good, because I can see actual things. (Man, Battambang, age 18-25)

When I can see with my eyes, I say it with confidence. (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

As the NDI pre-election assessment delegation notes, the "legacy of the one-party state between 1979 and 1991, and continued CPP dominance, has made it difficult to distinguish between the CPP and the government." The CPP of course has not been shy

in promoting its role in the projects and blurring the distinction between party and government. In the focus groups, participants talk about the CPP and the government as if they are one and the same.

Many buildings have been constructed by the CPP; wherever you go, you can see only CPP. All the foreign assistance has been attributed as individual [achievements of Hun Sen]. (Monk, Kampong Cham, age 30-50)

They [the CPP] develop field irrigation systems, provide loans to the people. They drill the wells and construct roads. (Woman, Takeo, age 25-35)

They build the toilets, schools and many pagodas. (Woman, Takeo, age 25-34)

Hun Sen constructs almost all the schools. Hun Sen is the Cambodian People's Party. I do not know where he gets the money from, but it's in abundance. (Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

Hun Sen's image among some participants is also due in large part to the perception that he brought peace and liberated the country from the Khmer Rouge. The first thing that many of the focus group participants associate with Hun Sen is January 7, 1979. The gratitude that many people express of Hun Sen's supposed role in restoring peace and liberating the country is profound.

He saved us from misery, he saved us from being killed and he flexed his muscles and showed us that we must cooperate with each other so that we serve the nation together. If it wasn't for him, the civil war would have continued and we would have all been killed. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

When I came out from Pol Pot, there was war. My husband went to the battlefield and he sometimes was wounded, so it is good that my children are growing up in a time when there is no longer war. (Woman, Kandal, age 24-35)

If he did not liberate us, then we wouldn't be here today. (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

I think of his help that gave me my life on January 7. Without him, I don't know what I would have become. Maybe nothing. I had no food and couldn't go anywhere. (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

Because of him, I am still alive today. (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

*Even if he's done something wrong, he still helped us at the beginning.
(Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)*

Even though I did not know and never experienced the Pol Pot regime, I think of January 7 as important. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

If the CPP has a liability, it is that its officials are believed to engage in corruption. These corruption allegations are not directed at Hun Sen, however. On the contrary, the participants exculpate Hun Sen from responsibility, assuming (or at least saying) that he must be unaware what his underlings are doing.

*He thinks of the poor people, but his civil servants always deceive him in order to get the gifts for themselves. So the poor still get nothing. He is unaware of what goes on beneath him; he just gives the commands.
(Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)*

The bad thing is that he is at the top and he does not know what is going on below him. Those who are under him are corrupt, but he is not aware of it. (Woman, Siem Reap, age 18-24)

The participants in Phnom Penh accuse the CPP and Hun Sen of using authoritarian methods to rule, although outside the capital there were fewer comments of this nature.

What we can see now is that it [the CPP] uses absolute power by depending on its henchmen. They think their party is more important than the nation. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

He walks around threatening people. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

When I think of the Cambodia People's Party, I think of a long story, especially recently, I think of shooting the monks, suppressing the demonstrators and corruption and a group of dictators. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

Regard for Sam Rainsy as Voice of the Opposition: Many of the focus group participants have high regard for Sam Rainsy. The focus group participants see him as a courageous, determined and honest leader.

He dares to oppose [the government] and tries to make workers wake up and struggle against the exploitation. (Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

He never changes his stance. He is always strong and he is the one who opposes the injustices and corruption within our society. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

He is not afraid of tanks and guns. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

If he did not oppose [the government], they could do whatever they want. When he opposes something and the newspaper covers the issue, they back off a little because if they continue to do bad things, they might lose face. He is not afraid to demonstrate in front of the National Assembly. (Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

...he is good because he visits people and sees their situation in every province. He walks around. (Man, Battambang, age 18-24)

He works for justice for the people. (Woman, Siem Reap, age 18-24)

Rainsy is recognized in particular for his defense of the rights of workers. In nearly every focus group, participants spoke about his visits to factories and support of factory workers.

Only Sam Rainsy comes to help us, and help us to get higher wages. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

When workers were getting laid off, Sam Rainsy organized a demonstration to help. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

He helped increase the wages of the workers when the [factory] bosses wouldn't pay enough. And when the workers protested, he helped them. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

In the market, they collect high taxes, but he demanded to lower them so that workers or the poor can sell their produce. (Woman, Siem Reap, age 18-24)

Despite the appreciation of Sam Rainsy's efforts on behalf of Cambodian workers, some of the participants feel he is sometimes too strident in his opposition to the government or do not endorse his appeals to other countries to apply political or economic sanctions against Cambodia as a whole.

Sometimes the government does the right thing, and yet he still organizes protests. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

His bad point is that he has done nothing noticeable besides inciting the workers to demonstrate. It is likely to block our nation's development with these disruptions. (Woman, Takeo, age 25-34)

During the ASEAN meeting, Sam Rainsy encouraged people not to come because he claimed Cambodia was not sufficiently peaceful and safe. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49, asked about negative things about Sam Rainsy)

But the party's principal liability, and the factor that may be suppressing its level of support, is the sense that it has not achieved anything concrete. The criticism is unfair of course, since the party does not hold power at the national level and only controls 13 communes. Despite this lack of opportunity, some of the focus group participants complain that Sam Rainsy has not fulfilled campaign promises.

He promised to build roads, but later he didn't do anything. (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

He promised in the election to help construct roads, schools, and to increase workers' salaries. This was just a speech of promises, so the people have no confidence in him. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

The Sam Rainsy Party faces a political Catch-22. It cannot provide public services because it does not have the political power or control the resources to do so. At the same time it has the challenge of garnering support without the capacity to offer something tangible to local communities. The party, therefore, needs to convince voters that it could govern effectively if it takes power, and manage and overcome the CPP's control of the country's institutions.

Even if he wins as prime minister, he does not have his subordinates everywhere. All the structures and members [of the current government] are from CPP and Funcinpec. So the work would not go along smoothly. Once he is in power, he can just steer the wheel, but if his followers do not obey, it will not work. (Monk, Kampong Cham, age 30-50)

Waning Confidence in Funcinpec: Funcinpec faces an identity crisis. As a junior partner in the coalition, it is overshadowed by the CPP and fails to get credit for the administration's accomplishments. But because it is part of the government, it is more difficult for it to be an aggressive critic of the government.

Many of the focus group participants have lost faith in the party itself, as its showing in the last two elections makes clear. Several say they had believed in Prince Ranariddh and Funcinpec, but have since lost confidence in the party, having felt let down by its performance in office.

He never really did very much or achieve anything. (Rural man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

The biggest failure of Funcinpec was in 1993 when the power was in his hands, but he still could not accomplish anything. ... The election was won, he was the prime minister, and the big institutions were also in his

hands, but still he could not do well. ... he made the people lose their faith in him. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

He was in office for about two and a half years until July 5-6. During those two and half years, he seemed not to do anything significant. (Monk, Kampong Cham, age 30-50)

Today, Funcinpec and the Prince are seen as weak and merely following the lead of Hun Sen and the CPP.

He is a Prince, but he looks frightened. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

He is a powerless leader, not influential. He's just waiting to follow others. When someone asks him to jump, he jumps. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

I feel sorry for him because everyone does what they want and they don't listen to him. He is always following and he never opposes anything or anyone. (Opinion Leader, Phnom Penh, age 35-55)

Participants also complain that Funcinpec lacks a presence in their communities and has not done anything tangible for them.

Hun Sen always goes to provide tents in the flood season, but I have never seen him [Prince Ranariddh.] (Woman, Kampong Cham, age 35-49)

I heard he would construct houses for us, so I waited to see. Maybe it would happen like this, but I was wrong. (Rural man, Takeo, age 35-49)

School and medicine distribution – Hun Sen does this two [times] for every [time] for Prince Ranariddh. (Woman, Kampong Cham, age 25-34)

Despite the criticism of Funcinpec, individuals support its participation in the coalition government because of the stability, as well as checks and balances, the arrangement is seen to provide.

It's very good, really very good. If we didn't have integration, the civil war and the killing would have continued. This means that his good point is that he agreed to negotiate in peace; he didn't want to fight. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

When three or four parties join together, they can oppose each other and bring prosperity. And if any party oppresses, the others would protest. So they dare not and the people can run their businesses freely. (Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

Whatever support the party retains seems to be due to its association with the royal family. Despite the frustration expressed with the party, Cambodians still speak in respectful terms about Prince Ranariddh.

I think that as the [son of the] King -- the Prince -- we must respect him.
(Man, Takeo, age 35-49)

This admiration does not extend to his political skills, however. On the contrary, he is seen as disengaged from the people and an uninspiring leader of the National Assembly.

He is not responsible as a leader. ... he has the right to decide everything, but he does little. And he has no ideas. (Woman, Phnom Penh, age 25-34)

New Strategies

The focus groups indicate that there will be a great deal of interest in the coming campaign. Participants are generally well-informed and opinionated and receptive to appeals from the parties. Unlike in many countries where voters are tired of and turned off by political advertising, a number of the participants say they want to hear more from all the parties.

I wanted to hear more. I wanted to know what their detailed policies were. If they were to win, what would they do and how knowledgeable are they about our situation? (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

I want the radio and TV networks to cover the entire country for all the parties and describe the various policies for everyone to know. (Man, Kandal, age 35-49)

The participants say that most of what they have learned about the parties, particularly the opposition, during previous campaigns has been via poster and sound trucks. The parties' reliance on such means has been due to two factors: limited resources and an inability to gain access to radio and television.

Nothing would benefit the parties more and create a more level playing field than gaining access to television and radio. If the parties press one issue with the government and with foreign observers, it should be to gain more equal access to the airwaves and more balanced coverage from the state-controlled media. Opposition parties cannot compensate for a lack of access to the media with sound trucks and posters.

If they only posted advertisements on the tree, then sometimes we would read and sometimes not. (Man, Siem Reap, age 50-64)

But access to the media is only the first step. The draft National Election Committee regulations that would provide four hours per day of equal media access for the political parties on state-run media would be an enormous opportunity for all the parties, but they would have to use their time wisely and effectively. Simply replaying a speech of a party leader, as is done with the sound trucks, is not effective. In the focus groups, we played some tapes and videos of speeches by politicians that the parties have disseminated. The long speeches, peppered with traditional rhetoric and platitudes, were far from memorable and failed to move or persuade participants.

In order to distinguish themselves and capture the public's attention, each of the parties needs a more creative strategy and a focused, credible message. Based on the research to date, we would suggest the following strategies and messages for each of the major parties. This guidance comes with caveats, however; more authoritative advice would require a national survey in order to have more definitive information about public attitudes toward various issues, an understanding of target groups, and the effectiveness of potential messages.

Addressing the Voters' Needs

In order to distinguish themselves and capture the public's attention, each of the parties needs a more creative strategy and a focused, credible message. Although a quantitative national survey would be needed to obtain definitive data on the kinds of messages that would be most effective for each of the political parties, the focus groups provide some initial general guidance on what Cambodian voters are looking for from the parties.

The findings of the focus groups suggest that Cambodians are not necessarily seeking change for change's sake. On the contrary, many voters are pleased with the progress that the country has made over the past decade. Having said that, the voters do have significant grievances – about the cost of living, crime, corruption and other issues.

The parties will not gain supporters by addressing these issues with empty rhetoric. Cambodian voters are sophisticated enough to gauge the credibility of campaign promises, and they are highly opinionated about the relative merits and capacity of the major parties. Parties will be most successful if they present serious, credible proposals, while making the case that they have the capacity to deliver and a record of having done so.

Party platforms should focus on both short and near-term development. The basic infrastructure needs of the populace are still great. Schools, roads and hospitals need to be constructed throughout the country, and many Cambodian farmers still require irrigation for their land. But the public also recognizes the value of long-term development programs, particularly the importance of increasing access to and raising the quality of education.

The rule of law is also an issue that parties must address. As noted above, corruption is seen to pervade the judicial system and other areas, such as education. Corruption is not merely a moral issue, but an economic one. Resources destined for public use are being diverted for private gain, thereby reducing the impact of development programs financed with domestic resources or foreign donors. Cambodian voters understand the impact that corruption is having on the country, and the party that highlights the issue and best makes the case that it can curb corruption and thereby raise the standard of living will increase its prospects for electoral success.