

# Cambodia Moves Ahead, Despite the McCainiacs

by Gail G. Billington

On July 27, roughly half of Cambodia's 12.3 million people went to the polls to vote in the third general election since the country regained its sovereignty from the United Nations Temporary Authority in Cambodia, which governed the country from the 1991 Paris Peace Talks until the first general election in 1993.

For a country that was subjected to one of the worst genocidal conflicts and mass bombardments in modern history, the 2003 general election shows that Cambodia is eager to move away from the horrors of the past to assume its rightful place within a community of sovereign nations. With few exceptions—and those exceptions derive from the ideologically-driven prejudices of American elected officials—the July general election is considered to have been “free and fair,” and the most peaceful and successful to date. Indeed, the former Representative of the United Nations Secretary General in Cambodia (1994-97), Benny Widyono, who participated as a foreign observer in this year's elections, wrote in the Aug. 1-14 *Phnom Penh Post* that this year's vote is even more “a miracle on the Mekong” than the 1998 election, a reference to the exuberant characterization given the 1998 election by former U.S. Rep. Steven Solarz at the time. To a much larger degree, this election is a home-made miracle.

European Union observers hailed the election as well conducted, in a peaceful atmosphere; and the U.S. State Department said the election process appeared to have been carried out in an “orderly” way. Singapore's ambassador to Cambodia, Verghese Mathews, told Agence France Presse that for many Cambodians, these have been the best elections so far. More surprising, the *Wall Street Journal*-owned *Far Eastern Economic Review*, which is usually brutally critical of Cambodia's Prime Minister, issued an editorial on Aug. 7 entitled “Cambodia Votes Surprisingly, Not Such a Dirty Election at All.”

The observer group from the Fund for Reconciliation and Development, led by former Canadian Ambassador to Cambodia, Gordon Longmuir, said of the elections, “I think that in many ways this election more than met international standards. I am certainly not aware of any instances, have not seen any evidence of tampering or manipulation.”

## Enter the McCainiacs

The main exception to the enthusiasm was that of the International Republican Institute (IRI), whose evaluation di-

rectly contradicted nearly everyone else. The IRI, headed by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), has taken the lead historically in attempts to undermine Prime Minister Hun Sen's government. McCain's cohort, Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), who calls Cambodia “the Zimbabwe of Southeast Asia,” has resorted to desperate measures to undermine the government. In a commentary in the July 28 *Boston Globe*, one day after the voting—which article was reprinted in Cambodia—McConnell said that Prime Minister Hun Sen was “a major impediment to sustainable development in Cambodia and to prospects for free and fair elections.”

McConnell's solution? Buy the elections. On June 26—that is, as the official month-long campaign got under way—McConnell, joined by Sens. John Kyl (R-Ariz.) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), with backing from Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), introduced Senate Bill 1365, the “Cambodia Democracy and Accountability Act of 2003,” which proposes to make an additional \$21.5 million in aid available to Cambodia over and above the 2004 budget request of \$43 million, on condition that “the Secretary of State certifies and reports to the appropriate congressional committees that new leadership in Cambodia has been elected in free and fair elections, and that Prime Minister Hun Sen is no longer in power.” The bill also slaps limitations on the conduct of an upcoming UN-sponsored trial of surviving Khmer Rouge leaders, and prioritizes investigation of a 1997 grenade attack, in which an IRI representative at a rally was injured and others were killed.

Foreign observers not associated with IRI commented in post-election report-back meetings that the IRI team, led by former New Jersey Governor and Environmental Protection Agency chief Christine Todd Whitman, made little effort to work with other observer groups in post-election evaluations. They added that IRI's reports on the elections appeared to have been largely written before they took place.

## The ‘Miracle on the Mekong’

An estimated 600 international observers and 26,000 Cambodians fanned out across the country's 24 provinces and major cities, including delegations from the European Union; the National Endowment for Democracy's IRI and the IRI's sister organization, the National Democratic Institute; and the U.S.-based Fund for Reconciliation and Development, a non-governmental organization with a history of work in the region going back to the first U.S. relief mission to Cambodia in 1979.

Nearly half of Cambodia's 12.8 million population are registered voters, and with the population growing by 1 million every five years, Cambodia's youth, who may not have directly suffered the horrors of the past, will increasingly shape the political environment.

In advance of the elections, the Asia Foundation commissioned a survey consisting of a random, representative sample of 1,008 in-person interviews with Cambodian citizens over

age 18, in 24 of the 25 provinces. The survey sample mirrored the adult population of Cambodia as a whole, when compared to the results of the national census: 45% male, 55% female, 18% urban, 81% rural, 50% 18-35 years old, and 50% older than 35.

The survey found: 81% think that things in Cambodia are going in the right direction; 81% do not feel obligated to vote for a party that gives them money or gifts; 79% feel free to express their political opinion in the area where they live; 78% feel free to vote for another party if they are unhappy with the government; 76% are satisfied with the performance of the national government; 67% agree that if a person sees or hears about election problems, that person should report them; 66% are satisfied with the performance of the National Assembly representatives; and 41% feel their own personal economic situation has improved, compared to two years ago. The most often named problems were poverty and water issues.

In the 1998 general election an estimated 93% of eligible voters voted. This year about 81% were said to have voted, but even so, it puts to shame voter participation in the United States, where far less than half the electorate votes and the President can be elected with fewer than one-quarter of eligible voters voting.

This year's elections were far less violent than in the past. Eleven people were reported killed during the election period, but the deaths were not necessarily linked to the elections. For the first time, the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy, through the National Democratic Institute, sponsored public debates and the opportunity to question political party members, including party officials, on their commitment to maintain peace and tranquility in the country.

Women played an increasingly important role in the elections. Due to war, women outnumber men, and one in five households is headed by a woman. Many are teachers, who were crucial in the conduct of the vote. This election also gave opportunities to the 275,000 handicapped war victims.

### Prospect of Forming New Government

Twenty-two political parties contested these elections, of which only three secured a significant number of seats in the National Assembly: the Cambodian People's Party led by Prime Minister Hun Sen; the royalist Funcinpec party led by King Norodom Sihanouk's sons, Princes Norodom Sirivudh and Norodom Ranariddh; and the eponymous Sam Rainsy Party, named for the French-trained economist who is the

poster boy for the IRI. There were reports that all three parties engaged in vote buying. More serious, however, was the use of the long-practiced race-baiting against Vietnamese immigrants by both Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy—an indirect attack on Hun Sen, who was aided by Vietnam in defeating the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

Hun Sen chose to sit out the campaign, resting on his record of bringing peace and beginning the reconstruction process. In the end, his CPP party won 2.45 million votes, or 73 of the 123 seats, just 9 seats shy of being able to form a one-party government under the constitutional rule that the government must represent two-thirds of the seats. Rainsy, with 1.13 million votes, was slightly ahead of royalist Funcinpec with 1.07 million votes. The two will split the remaining 50 Assembly seats between them.

The CPP is dominant in rural areas, while Rainsy's base is largely in Phnom Penh and urban areas. Funcinpec was the big loser, having lost 15 seats in the 1998 election and another 17 seats now. Internal feuds and defections to the CPP have taken a toll.

However, both Rainsy and Funcinpec are holding back on forming a coalition with Hun Sen's party. Rather, they have proposed a tripartite government, *without* Hun Sen as Prime Minister, but an appointed neutral Prime Minister, flanked by deputy prime ministers from the three leading parties. Hun Sen has refused. By law, a new National Assembly must convene within 60 days; that is, by October. The final vote count is expected on or about Sept. 6.

### Cambodia Comes Into Its Own

Regardless of what the IRI Republicans think of Cambodia, it is important to take account of how far the country has come since the first UN-sponsored general elections. Cambodia is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and served as the chairman of the 10-nation organization until recently, when the chairmanship rotated to Indonesia. Cambodia's chairmanship was highlighted by an explosion of interest in the regional Mekong development plans of the Asian Development Bank, suggesting that Cambodia and all of ASEAN are acutely aware that the key task of the regional association is to expedite lifting the economies of especially the four poorest ASEAN members, at least up to the level of their better-off neighbors.

To that end, on Aug. 2, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar launched a joint economic cooperation project in five areas to bridge economic gaps and reduce poverty. The cooperation includes trade and investment promotion, agricultural and industrial development, transportation links, tourism, and human resources development. The meeting was co-chaired by Thai Foreign Affairs Minister Surakiart Sathirathai, Laos Foreign Minister Somsavad Lengsavat, Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Nam Hong, and Myanmar's Foreign Minister Win Aung. Thailand pledged to purchase more goods from its neighbors and to provide technical assistance

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to make goods more competitive, as well as facilitating customs and inspection procedures.

Senator McCain, unwilling to see Thailand address the real poverty of its neighbors, denounced Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a public letter, threatening to introduce legislation imposing sanctions *on Thailand* (as the Senate has already against Myanmar) if Bangkok refuses to join in the McCainiacs' subversion of its neighbors.

In Cambodia, the economy is the top priority. An estimated 36% of the population live under the official poverty line of \$1 per day, and nearly one-third are illiterate. At a time when the globalized "free trade" system is collapsing, Cambodia is putting perhaps too much hope on becoming the first least developed country, or LDC, to enter the World Trade Organization during the Cancun meeting on Sept. 10-14. Cambodian negotiator Sok Siphana expects to seal the last bilateral trade agreement for entry with the United States, Panama, and India within weeks, barring unforeseen disruptions or interference. In 2001, Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA) signed a proposal for a study on regional development of the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Growth Corridor, which defines a major industrial manufacturing center involving a range of secondary and tertiary industries. Such an initiative would open up a broader range of employment opportunities, in which the for-export garment industry is currently the largest national employer after agriculture.

On the political front, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk, one of Southeast Asia's most adept political survivors, issued a statement to the nation on Aug. 10, dismissing as "naive" Rainsy and Funcinpec's curious tripartite formulation, instead recommending a CPP-led coalition with Hun Sen as Prime Minister and a Deputy Prime Minister from either Rainsy or Funcinpec, similar to the previous CPP-Funcinpec coalition. Acknowledging the dominant role of the CPP, King Sihanouk also proposed that CPP President Chea Sim serve as President of the Senate and that CPP elder statesman Heng Samrin be appointed President of the National Assembly.

In making his proposal, the King sent a very strong message to all concerned, especially Rainsy and Funcinpec: "The present 'problem' is simple, but if certain politicians and certain political parties want to make it 'complicated' then there will inevitably be unrest, or even serious political crisis and national division." In closing, the King added, "But I repeat: The King reigns but does not govern. What I have written here is only the humble opinion of a Khmer citizen."

As of this writing, Funcinpec and Rainsy, despite the King's advice, have announced that their representatives will travel to Europe and the United States, seeking support to overthrow their nation's election. According to the Constitution, National Assembly seats will be announced on Aug. 14 and Sept. 6, followed by the convening of the Assembly on Sept. 25. The new government should take office in early October.