



First Ever Multi-Party Candidate Debates in Cambodian Election

USAID supported national election activities which helped to develop “a Culture of Peaceful Dialogue” between political parties.



Candidates celebrate the completion of a series of first ever public candidate debates for the 2003 National Election.

Cambodia's July 27, 2003 national election saw a relatively calm, orderly process with high voter turnout and a technically sound result. As in past elections, the ruling Cambodian People's Party controlled election administration and most of the electronic media, but equitable access to media outlets improved markedly over previous elections.

In 2003, USAID backed introduction of debates among parliamentary candidates that included question from a live audience. Twelve debates, with candidates from four provinces, were broadcast on television and radio. The debates drew enthusiastic live audiences of at least 25,000 and received extensive national and international media coverage. In total, 20 debates were staged over the 30day campaign period. Fourteen of the 23 parties contesting the elections participated, including all three of the parties represented in the National Assembly. In previous elections, Cambodia's opposition parties received virtually no television airtime; in 2003 they received more than 20 hours of collective exposure as part of the debate program alone. Extensive media attention to the program itself supplemented coverage.

In previous Cambodian elections, voters identified political parties by their individual leaders who ran on party history and “accomplishments”. Debates such as these are an unprecedented opportunity for the Cambodian electorate to hear parties' views on relevant issues, interact with their candidates, and air their concerns. Twenty multi-party all-candidates debates across Cambodia, of which 12 were broadcast on television and radio—a first for a country with no tradition of peaceful and constructive political debate. All major parties participated and the debates attracted live audiences that totaled over 25,000, in addition to widespread national and international media coverage. The program was complemented by the distribution of over 4000,000 printed voter guides, showing party positions on issues that voters had identified as being of primary concern. The head of a Cambodian human rights NGO noted that the popularity of these debates has “completely taken the ruling party by surprise.” Ruling party candidates were clearly doing their homework to adapt to the debate format. Opposition parties used the debate venues not only to disseminate their party policies, but also to highlight the shortcomings of the ruling party. Some of the small parties, although less organized and less professional than the major parties, are beginning to capitalize on the open for a to broaden their bases and attract more voters.