


# FORCE OF THE FUTURE?

## Youth Participation in Politics in Cambodia

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### I. Introduction

**YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN CAMBODIA** is still limited in terms of opportunities for candidates to run for public office and other activities related to human rights and democracy. When young people get involved in politics, they often remain passive supporters rather than active decision-makers. Even though close to 70 percent<sup>1</sup> of the Cambodian population are between 14 to 30 years old, the needs and the perspectives of the younger generation are not reflected in the policies and programs of the government. From 1993 until the present, a national youth development policy has not yet been developed.

CAMBODIA	
	
Country Background	
Head of State	H.M. Norodom Sihamoni
Head of Government	Prime Minister Hun Sen
Government	Democratic, Constitutional Monarchy
Capital	Phnom Penh
Population	13,363,421 (July 2004 est.)
Language	Khmer
Religion	Buddhism
Independence	From France: declared in 1949, recognized in 1953
Suffrage	Voting age is 18 years old, universal
Currency	Riel

Sources: The Official Website of the Royal Government of Cambodia, Websites of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Wikipedia [date accessed 11 April 2005]

<sup>1</sup> National Census 1998.

Making Cambodian youth an important part of society is still not a priority of the state, international donors and other concerned sectors. In many ways, the Cambodian youth are somewhat of a “forgotten group.”

The Khmer Rouge regime and the long-standing civil war have had a profound influence on how people interact with one another and their openness to new ideas. The younger generation, by contrast, is being exposed to diverse external influences and benefits from improved educational opportunities. Yet at the same time, Cambodia is a hierarchical society, which demands respect towards elders and authority. This continues to limit possibilities for young people to express their views and opinions. This is also the reason why, when young people join political parties, they have little opportunity to be part of the leadership. The predominant mindset is that young people still need to learn and should listen to the older and more experienced members.

Young Cambodians are confronted with big social problems: extreme poverty, high rates of illiteracy, human trafficking and sexual exploitation, increasing drug abuse and the highest rate of HIV/AIDS in the region. Although freedom of expression, the right to demonstrate and the right to political association and organization are stated in the Cambodian Constitution, in reality, the government often suppresses these rights.

And yet, young Cambodians try to express their views through media campaigns, lobbying political leaders, organizing and taking part in demonstrations and public forums. Their willingness and commitment to influence society are also seen in their involvement in political parties and other youth associations.

## II. Who are the Youth?

The Cambodian definition of “youth” remains unclear, as there is no any legal definition. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports defines youth as persons within the age range from 14 to 30 years old.

Political parties have their own definitions of youth. For the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), youth comprises persons from ages 15 to 30. The FUNCINPEC party—which stands for the National United Front for Peaceful, Cooperative, Independent and Neutral Cambodia—identifies youth as those from 16 to 39 years old. The opposition Sam Rainsy Party defines youth as persons between 18 and 40 years old.

Some NGOs working for young people, like the Khmer Youth Association (KYA), categorize youth as persons between 16 and 35 years old.

This shows that there is no common acceptance or agreement on the definition of the youth. It seems that every group or organization defines this sector according to their own respective guidelines. There has never been a general consultation process or discussion among important leaders and organizations on the definition of youth in Cambodia.

### Youth Profile

Cambodia has a very young population. According to the National Institute of Statistics – General Population Census of Cambodia, between 58.4% and 61.1% of the population was below 24 years old in 1998. In 2004, Cambodians aged 24 years old and below comprised 56.3% of the population. In the same year, the total Cambodian population stood at 13 million with an average

household size of 5 persons. Life expectancy in Cambodia is 63.4 years for women and 57.1 years for men.<sup>2</sup>

More demographic information is found in the table below:

Indicator	1998	2004
Population size	11,437,656	13,091,228
Age Structure		
0-9 years	27.0%	19.8%
10-24 years	31.4%	36.5%
25-49 years	26.3%	27.2%
50+ years	15.3%	16.2%
Annual Growth Rate	2.45%	1.81%
Total Fertility Rate	4.0	3.3

Sources: Census 1998, CIPS 2004, CDHS 2000

Young people in Cambodia are vulnerable to illiteracy, drug addiction, HIV/AIDS infection, gang-related crimes and unemployment. This was a result of a study called National Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2003-2004 which was conducted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports with the support of UNICEF and UNESCO in 24 provinces in Cambodia. The aim of the study was to examine the risk behavior of young people between the ages of 11 and 18. The results show that:

- ▷ Fifty percent of out-of-school young people are illiterate. Many young Cambodians engage in risky behavior, although those attending school tend to take fewer risks than out-of-school young people.
- ▷ A third of sexually active young people never wear condoms and 24% are not aware of sexually transmitted infections. More than 90% know ways to avoid HIV/AIDS, but only 53% have been educated about HIV/AIDS.

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<sup>2</sup> The Cambodian Inter-Censal Population Survey (CIPS) 2004 of Ministry of Planning.

- ▷ Forty-two percent of all young people and 48% of those living in rural areas have received no education at all.
- ▷ Thirteen percent of the young generation has been involved in fighting and 14% drink alcohol.
- ▷ Although less than 2% reported sexual activity, 33% of all young people said they personally know young men who take part in gang rapes.
- ▷ Among those having sex, 40% said that they did so after drinking alcohol.
- ▷ Less than one percent said they used drugs. But 21% said amphetamines were available in their local area.
- ▷ Only 10 percent eat fruit every day and only 40% eat vegetables every day.
- ▷ Nineteen percent have thought about committing suicide, and almost 50% of young Cambodians never do any exercise.

Among young Cambodians who engage in risky activities, many are from lower age bracket. There are reports of out-of-school young people engaging in premarital sex as early as 11 years old. Among those who use alcohol begin drinking by the age of 12.

According to the Cambodian Constitution, every Cambodian citizen, whether female or male, should have at least nine years free education.

The educational system in Cambodia is as follows:

- ▷ six years of primary school (grades 1-6);
- ▷ three years of lower secondary school (grades 7-9); and
- ▷ another three years of upper secondary school (grades 10-12).

A university degree on the average requires four years of higher education, except for medicine, which requires 7 years to finish.

From 2003 to 2004, the enrolment for grade 1 stood at 78.7%. Enrolment rates are low for children in remote rural areas. Each year, many pupils are forced to quit school, which exacerbates illiteracy.

The female enrolment ratio decreases from lower secondary school onwards because educational institutions and social services in Cambodia provide more opportunities for male students. If, for example, there are two children in the family, one boy and one girl, the family usually decides to send the boy to school first. Young women are not allowed go far from their family or sleep even one night away from their family. In rural areas, secondary schools are far away from the villages where the families reside. Frequently, Cambodian parents ask their daughters to help work at home or at the farm and marry early, rather than sending them far away to secondary school.

The Ministry of Education Youth and Sports provides Technical and Vocational Training (TVET) in four technical institutes in Phnom Penh, three institutes outside of Phnom Penh, and thirty-two provincial TVET centers. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Youth Rehabilitation, the Ministry of Rural Development, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Women Affairs also offer vocational trainings. Several NGOs also provide TVET.

According to a joint observation by United Nations Trust Fund for Women and Others, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, United Nations Development Programme, Ministry of International Development of United Kingdom and Ministry of Women's Affairs and Veterans in 2001, "unemployed people are 60% and 73% of unemployed people are men ranging from 15-24 years old." The number of unemployed women is higher than

men and the unemployment rate among youth is also high as well. The observation shown that the rate of unemployment of people who live in urban is higher than rural areas. Even though the rate of unemployment in rural areas is lower than urban it does not mean their living conditions are better. Almost 100% of their jobs include only farming, especially rice planting.

According to the human rights organization in Cambodia, ADHOC, with their Report on the Human Rights Situation in 2004 the number of students that graduated from universities each year is 43,000 persons but students who can get jobs ranges only from 15,000 to 20,000 persons each year. This would mean that less than half of the graduates get a job. According to Radio Free Asia, youth unemployment in 2004 was 10% and is expected to increase to 15% in 2005. The youth is increasing with a number of 320,000 persons for each year. Factory workers get salaries lower than US\$45 per month. With precarious working conditions in the factory, low salary and long work hours, it is very difficult for young people to obtain jobs that will support their daily living expenses.

The same report mentioned that in 2004, the rate of street children who use drugs reached 73.3% from which 40% are young women. These young people are especially vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection. Even though Cambodia has established the National Authority for Combating Drugs, the measures are still weak and do not gain confidence from the people. Even the school administrations, state media and relevant authorities do not cooperate well with the NGOs that work on this area.

It is difficult to obtain accurate data on the percentage of unemployed young people in Cambodia. Unemployment among young people is quite high, which gravely affects their morale. Even if young people graduate from school, there are few job opportunities for them. Only few companies such as garment

factories can absorb young people for employment. However, these factories continually face going out of business. Salary for jobs in these sectors is very low, in average of US\$45 per month.

### III. Official Institutions and Processes

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports was established in 1993. It is the only government department dealing with youth issues, but it has never formulated nor implemented a general youth policy for young Cambodians. It only focuses on short-term plans on sports and scouting.

In Cambodia, the right to vote is granted from the age of 18 onwards. The legal age for marriage is 18 years for women and 20 years for men. For a Cambodian to apply for candidacy in the national assembly, the age requirement is 25 years old and above. To become a member of the senate, candidates must be at least 40 years old.

Cambodia is a monarchy, but the King's power is limited by the Constitution. The chief executive is the Prime Minister who leads the Cabinet Council. The electoral system in Cambodia is based on proportional representation. People vote for a party, not for a candidate. The political parties nominate candidates for the party list. The National Election Commission asks all parties to send them their lists of candidates, but the names of candidates are not found on the ballots. The voting system in Cambodia is calculated according to number of seats in each province and the number of seats is determined according to the size of population. The biggest province, Kampong Cham has 18 seats followed by Phnom Penh with 12 seats, Siem Reap with 6 seats, and Sihanoukville with one seat. For one seat, at least 40,000 votes are required but for the *small* provinces (*only one seat constituency*) around 20,000



votes are needed. The candidates from Khmer Front Party could not win enough votes to get one seat.

Most of the young people who join political parties are 18 years old and above. Young people cannot become candidates, unless they are members of any political party registered with the Ministry of Interior.

Running for public office is very expensive. A candidate needs at least US\$50,000 to run for a party position and a chance to win a seat in parliament. This amount of money has been paid not only for election campaigns of top list candidacies during the elections but also for other high positions in government. With three terms of the parliamentary elections, no party has ever announced to the public their expenditures and incomes as well as the sources. Young politically active people simply do not have money to launch their campaigns. Consequently, there is very little opportunity for young people to become decision-makers. In Parliament, there are only few members below 30 years of age. Gender barriers are also important problems, which explains the very limited number of young women in politics.

## Political Parties and Youth Wings

Political participation of young people in Cambodia is generally channeled through the main political parties. All three main political parties have youth wings: the Youth Association of Cambodia for CPP, the FUNCINPEC Youth, and the Khmer Nation Youth Movement of the Sam Rainsy Party.

The Youth Association of Cambodia (YAC), the oldest of the three political youth wings, started in 1978. Former Prime Minister Hun Sen founded the YAC and was its first president. Until 1993, the YAC enjoyed strong support from the state due to its link to

the ruling party. It received funding and had committees at the national, provincial and district levels, as well as in schools. A special political education unit was responsible for propaganda and ideological training for active members. According to the YAC, they had 800,000 members at that time with very close international contacts with youth and students from Russia, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Vietnam. To this day, only the CPP and YAC youth wing have access to all schools throughout the country. The other parties do not have the same opportunity.

In the 2003 parliamentary elections, CPP did not have candidate below 30 years of age. Only at the district level do we find a few young representatives. Even within the YAC, the chair, deputies and other leaders are close to 50 years old and above.

FUNCIPEC Youth Movement claims to have a network of ten NGOs working on young people's issues. There are 7,000 active network members, out of which 4,000 members are 30 years old and younger. One of the roles of the movement is to provide trainings on their "modern monarchy" ideology and management skills.

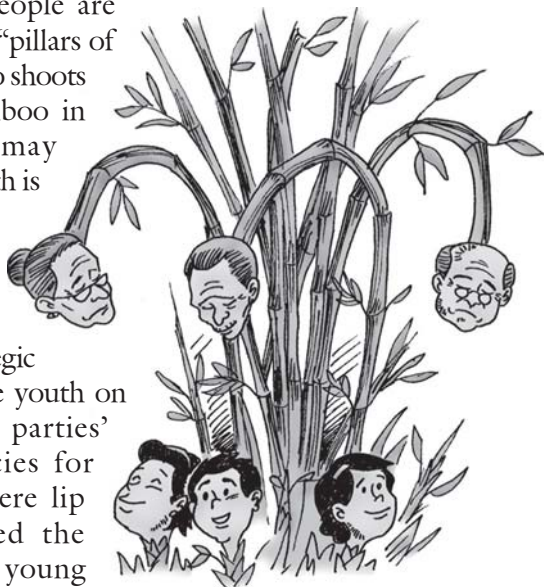
In Parliament, there is only one representative from FUNCIPPEC Party, daughter of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the president of the party, who is below 30 years old. As part of the coalition government with CPP, there are 23 young people from FUNCIPPEC holding positions in government as undersecretaries of state and deputy provincial governors. Only one out of the two women candidates who ran for office in the 2003 elections got elected.

Among the three political youth wings, it is the Khmer Nation Youth Movement that has the most visible links to the mother party, the Sam Rainsy Party. With 19 branches all over the country, it works strategically to integrate students and youth into the Sam

Rainsy Party. Believing that it is of vital importance to get young people involved in politics, it provides ideological training and visits universities and provinces to inform students about Sam Rainsy policies and programs.

The Sam Rainsy Party has the highest percentage of young members. Thirty percent of the Board of Directors is between 30 and 40 years old, including the General Secretary. The Chair of the Khmer Nation Youth Movement is also a member of the Steering Committee and a representative to parliament. However, out of 14 candidates aged 25 to 35 years who ran for the national assembly elections in 2003, only one woman and two men emerged victoriously.

Even though some concerns and comments raised by young people were included in the political platforms of the three main political parties, the real implementation has not materialized. The three main political parties obviously need the support of the young generation. Young people are often described as the “pillars of the nation” or “bamboo shoots that will replace bamboo in the future.” They may recognize that the youth is an accelerating force for the future of the nation; however, none of them has articulated a clear, strategic long-term plan for the youth on paper. The political parties’ programs and policies for young people are mere lip service. Parties need the political support of young



people to win elections. But after the elections, the reality is that the youth remain far from their consideration and thinking.

There is, however, one exception. In 2002, the first youth party in Cambodian history was formed. The Khmer Front Party brought together students and young adults with a passion to stand independently. It was successfully registered in 2003. The party organized campaigns and demonstrations against government policies and sent petition letters on a number of key issues to the former King Norodom Sihanouk and other high-ranking officials.

Almost all the candidates from the Khmer Front Party who ran for the elections in 2003 were between 25 to 36 years old. They fielded candidates in eleven provinces in different parts of the country, but were not able to win a single seat in Parliament. Although party members lacked experience and financial resources compared to traditional politicians, their bravery made this a remarkable effort.

### International Support for Youth Participation in Cambodia

In Cambodia, international donors also have much influence. Several support youth programs are geared towards the promotion of greater democracy.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) started working with the youth wings of the three main parties in 2003, by providing trainings and strengthening inner-party practices. According to NDI Program Officer, the Sam Rainsy Party has since reviewed its structure, amended internal rules toward greater democracy and transparency, and is doing more activities for the Khmer Nation Youth Movement. FUNCIPPEC has also reviewed its



structure and CPP improved its youth participation, including the participation of women. As a result, the three parties committed to increase the number of youth and women candidates for the 2007 commune council election.

International Republican Institute (IRI) supports the YCC by encouraging young people to be more active in politics and providing political education to help them understand their roles in the democratic process. IRI Senior Program Officer explained that it is important for young people to identify their own personal values vis-à-vis the parties' political programs.



Participants of Women Participation in Politics Workshop

One of the programs of IRI is to promote participation in voting and party politics, especially for first-time voters aged 18 years old to be well-informed citizens. Its main goals are to foster greater participation by youth in the democratic process, promote wider acceptance of freedom of tolerance, and encourage elected officials to address issues of concerning Cambodia's youth.

There is also support from youth participation outside political parties. Forum Syd supports the non-governmental Khmer Youth Association on its program entitled "Encouraging and Promoting Young Women in Political Participation." EED supports KYA with regard to people's participation at the local level in the context of decentralization. The German Embassy supports KYA through funding for the monthly newsletter "Youth and Democracy," which is the only organ for young people's voices to be heard.

#### IV. Youth Associations and Political Expressions

Youth NGOs in Cambodia started their political participation in 1992, a year after the peace agreement ended many years of conflict in Cambodia. These were: the Khmer Youth Association (KYA), the Khmer Students Association, the Khmer Students and Intellectual Association and the United Neutral Khmer Students.

The four student-based associations dominated the scene from 1997 to 1998. Since then, especially in the past few years, quite a number of new organizations have sprung up, founded mainly by students from the universities in Phnom Penh while others have faded. Of the four youth organizations established in 1992, only two still exist.

At present, the most active youth organizations in the political sphere are the Students Movement for Democracy, KYA and the Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC).

*The Students Movement for Democracy* often organizes demonstrations and campaigns on issues related to democracy and other political activities.

*The Khmer Youth Association (KYA)* is engaged in trainings, networking, and advocacy and information dissemination. Each year, the NGO conducts at least 60 training sessions with around 600 women and 300 men participating. Some participants who have attended KYA trainings were elected as commune council members. KYA also provides training to encourage and promote young women in politics. KYA educates young women between the age of 16 to 35 years on the importance of political participation, the history of women in politics, the basis of democracy, human rights and general political knowledge. The objective of this program is to empower young women and improve their representation in political affairs.

KYA also organizes roundtable discussions on political issues by inviting political youth wing leaders to explain their party's policies. Another KYA activity is to facilitate meetings between youth delegates, government officials and political party leaders in order to discuss the development of a national youth policy. Yet this collaboration with government has not been very fruitful. Politicians in government often accuse youth groups of being partisan and do not take these efforts seriously. It is also difficult for leaders of youth groups to meet high-ranking officials face-to-face.



Youth Forum on “Political Parties’ Platform on Youth”

The NGO also often organizes campaigns and demonstrations on issues such as drugs, HIV/AIDS, and young people’s freedom of expression. Through these campaigns, youth and student movements as well as other worker unions raise their voices and express their protest against government policies.





Observers on their way to polling stations

During the 2003 elections, KYA trained more than 1,000 young election observers and sent them to all polling stations in the capital city of Phnom Penh City and provinces in coordination with the Committee For Free and Fair Election in Cambodia (COMFREL).

*The Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC)* works with young people within and outside schools. YCC has established networks in around 200 communes. It has active youth participation at the local commune level, with at least two representatives in each province. In total, there are 400 activists involved in monitoring and sharing of ideas with commune council members.

Another focus of YCC's work is conducting seminars on the advancement of democracy, good governance and transparency. YCC also trains young people how to develop press releases. These are sent to members of parliament and other relevant authorities to call their attention on specific issues in the community, which affect the young generation. The council also organized roundtable

discussions with the youth wings of political parties in nine provinces in the run-up to the 2003 elections to advocate three issues which the youth are most concerned about: health care, education and employment.

In the 2003 election, YCC conducted trainings on “Democracy and Voters Registration” to raise awareness on basic democracy, the procedure of name examination and voters’ registration, the



Participants attend in training and group discussion on “Democracy and Voters’ Registration”

importance of youth participation in election process and how to file a complaint in case one’s registration is denied. This was coupled with concerts with music that appealed to young people to encourage them to register as voters. There were also a series of radio call-in programs and a special “GoTV” campaign for this purpose.



YCC Special  
GoTV Campaign

## V. Conclusion and Assessment

In Cambodia, youth participation in politics remains problematic for the following reasons:

1. *There is still a wide gap between the younger and older generation:* Old people often dismiss young people for not having enough working experience and believe that politics is not a concern of young people. Young people should spend more time studying rather than thinking about politics.
2. *The lack of a youth policy:* The government has no youth policy. This makes it difficult for the youth to become an important sector in society.
3. *The prohibition on political discussions and meetings in schools:* The government does not allow political discussion and meetings in schools, because schools are seen as a neutral area where politics has no place.





4. *Interference of government in youth campaigns:* The government prohibited youth campaigns by the Khmer Front Party for being against officials' policies.
5. *Insincere politicians:* Young people are lured into supporting political parties by talk of democracy and transparency. But these remain empty promises.
6. *The lack of political capacity:* Young Cambodians rarely have a critical political orientation before they join political parties or activities. The majority of young people still don't have

the capacity and range of experiences to enable them to think critically and formulate their own political opinions.

7. *Overwhelming social problems experienced in Cambodia:* 43% of the Cambodian population is below the poverty line. Many young graduates are unemployed. Health issues and drug abuse continue to hamper young



peoples' ability for a good quality life. Almost 100% of poor people do not believe in the judiciary system, more than 80% of the people who go to court to find justice have to pay bribe money.

You know, I can be fair...  
It the price is right!



How can the problems related to youth participation be addressed?

There are ways to deal with present problems.

- ▷ Government and political parties must map their strategic, long-term plans for the youth. A national youth policy needs to be formulated in collaboration between government and youth groups. Implementation is of course also key.
- ▷ Quotas for youth representation at different levels and branches of government can also improve political participation by young people. It will ensure that more young people are nominated as candidates for elections.
- ▷ The political youth movement is still weak in Cambodia. But there are efforts to get more young Cambodians involved and increase the youth's strength through coalition-building and advocacy campaigns.

In conclusion, it must be stated that youth political participation is essential for bringing about changes and developing new ideas for nation building. It is important for young people to participate in decision-making processes and to speak for and protect youth interests. There needs to be a strengthening of discussions and young people's political expressions at the national, local and community levels.

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## Interviews

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- Mr. Mut Chantha, Senior Program Officer, NDI
- H.E. Ly Thuch, President of FUNCIPEC Youth Movement
- H.E. Pheng Heng, Vice President of FUNCIPEC Youth Movement
- H.E. Ngor Sovann, President of Khmer National Youth Movement
- Mr. Morm Leng Yany, General Secretary of Youth Association of Cambodia and Youth Working Group member of Cambodian People Party
- Mr. Mao Sam Oeurn, Secretary General of Khmer Front Party
- Mr. Mak Sarath, Secretary of YCC
- Mr. Sorn Dara, Vice President of Students Movement for Democracy