

# Cambodia National Assembly Election 2023 Monitoring Report



Interband, project manager Naoto Sakaguchi

## 1. Duration of our activities and organizations we visited

Interband conducted election monitoring activities in Phnom Penh and Kompong Thom Province.

The main destinations were as follows.

### July 13-21, 2012 Phnom Penh

- 1 COMFREL (Mr. Kim Chhorn)
- 2 Embassy of Japan (Ambassador Atsushi Ueno)
- 3 NEC (Mr. Hang Puthea)
- 4 Interviews with researchers on Cambodian politics and electoral system
- 5 Monitoring of the People's Party's election campaign and soup kitchen
- 6 Hearing on political awareness of young people at universities, etc.

### Names of schools and polling station numbers visited on July 23 (7 schools in Kampong Thom Province, 19 polling stations)

- 1 Hun Sen Balaing High School (1069,409.408.407)
- 2 Hun Sen Achartek Acnavoat Primary School (452.453,454,458,459,1115)
- 3 Thnal Beak primary and Secondary School (358,1067)
- 4 Atsu School (607)
- 5 Sam Dachakak MhasonaBdey Dokcho Fun Sen Drey Kdey Primary Secondary School (634,635,636)
- 6 Kompong Chuteal Primary School (1079)
- 7 Krayea High School (502,503)

## 2. Purpose of the activity

From 1992 to 1993, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), with the cooperation of the international community, conducted activities for peace and democracy in Cambodia and held constitutional parliamentary elections. Thirty years have passed since then.

Japan also played an active role in this process. A tragic incident occurred when Atsuhito Nakata, who was involved in election support activities as a UN volunteer, was killed in his duties.

Japan's contribution to Cambodia is still regarded as the most successful example of Japan's peace contributions in the history of international peace contributions.

Japan has a responsibility to continue its peace contributions to the international community. We believe that it is of great significance and necessity to examine the results of our electoral assistance in Cambodia and to continuously research better ways to

support democratization.

With this in mind, the NGO Interband sent election monitoring missions to Cambodia in 2002, 2003, 2013, and 2018. We took part in our fifth Cambodian election monitoring mission, with the following perspectives.

- (1) To inspect the current state of peace and democracy in Cambodia, which the international community worked together to achieve in the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).
- (2) We proposed to the Japanese and Cambodian governments to computerize voter registration and to reform the electoral system to prevent fraud. Japan particularly aimed to establish a system in which Cambodian national IDs would be linked to the host computer of the Election Commission, so that no double registration or other frauds would occur. This time, to research how this system is being operated and what issues need to be addressed for the future.
- (3) To monitor voting and vote counting in Kompong Thom Province, including the area where Atsuhito Nakata worked and where the Candlelight Party made great result in the commune elections, and to know people's voting behavior.

### **3. Evaluation of National Assembly election in 2023**

#### **Evaluative points**

There has been a significant improvement in the reliability of the voter registration process, which has long been an issue: comparing 2013 and 2018, the population increased by about 1.35 million from 14.68 million to 16.03 million, while the number of voters decreased by 1.3 million from 9.68 million to 8.38 million. This represents a significant decrease in double registration, which has been a major problem in past elections. (There were 9.71 million voters this time, up 1.33 million from five years ago.) This time, there was no confusion at the polling stations regarding voting rights. These are considered a significant evolution.

#### **Challenges**

Lack of tolerance for dissenting opinions, including political participation by opposition parties.

Lack of freedom for citizens to express their political opinions.

The freedom to run for election and become a member of parliament may be threatened.

Very difficult to have a media presence that is critical of the government.

#### **Comment**

We extremely regret the lack of participation of the largest opposition party in the 2018 and now the 2023 National Assembly elections. In order for democracy to evolve, a multi-party system requires fair competition, and it is also very important for the people to be able to freely express their political opinions and for the media to be able to report freely. Considering these factors, I must say that democracy in Cambodia is still far from the ideal that UNTAC aimed for.

We believe that a fair government can only come from a fair electoral system. We therefore believe that reform efforts to create a fair and transparent electoral system must be ongoing. Therefore, we have decided that we should conduct monitoring activities again this time for the sake of Cambodia's future democracy. As recommendations from Japanese civil society through this election monitoring, we would like to propose the

following to the Japanese government and others, and work toward their implementation.

### **Recommendations:**

#### **(1) Further improve accuracy in voter registration.**

By digitizing the national ID and linking it to the Election Commission's host computer, double registration has been dramatically reduced. In addition, the introduction of biometric identification systems made it impossible for the same person to vote. The Japanese-supported voter registration system contract is scheduled to expire in 2026. Further consideration should be given to the establishment of more advanced systems as technology evolves. However, it must not be used for the purpose of depriving people of the freedom to run for election.

#### **(2) To support exporting Cambodian experience and technology**

Cambodia's voter registration system is very accurate, and the value of exporting this system to a country where lack of reliability in voter registration is an impediment to democracy is great. Why not combine Cambodia's experience with Japan's technical assistance and work together for peace cooperation?

#### **(3) Changing to transparent ink.**

Both the right to vote and not to vote should be respected. While it is inherently desirable for more people to participate in elections, voting should not be forced. Some other countries use transparent ink that reacts only when exposed to special light. The introduction of transparent ink should be considered in protecting the human rights of voters.