

## Participation of Youth in Elections

Participation of youth in elections is crucial to: increasing voter turnout; enabling influence on decision-making processes; allowing for youth representation; strengthening youth attitude and tendencies towards taking part voluntarily in elections as educators or election observers; and enhancing political integration for democracy. In effect, participation is vital to helping youths strengthen themselves to become potential future pillars of politics and democracy.

According to research on culture and race, in Asian countries including Cambodia, age is a noteworthy factor in preventing youths from getting involved in making important decisions in national as well as social politics.

National Institute of Statistics data show that, in 2005, youths in Cambodia made up more than 30%, equal to over four million, of Cambodia's population of approximately 14 million. This estimate refers to those reaching the eligibility age for voting (over 1.7 million) to those of around 30 years old. Since 2005, the amount of youths under 30 years old has increased by an average of 200,000 per year.<sup>1</sup>

In Cambodian elections, no calculation of the real percentage of youths as voters is enabled. However, according to a rough calculation based on the above figure of over four million youths, the under-30 years-old group eligible to vote may exceed 53% of the 7,799,371 registered voters. However, some of these face difficulties which prevent them from going to vote, as compared with other groups of voters. Low turnout of voters is another problem: there has been a marked decrease in voter turnout from one election to the next since 1998 (93.77% in 1998 to 67.87% in 2007). This has become a concern for the forthcoming 2008 general elections. It is key to look into whether such low turnout is resulting from the difficulties of participation that youths are experiencing, and from the fact that this group is largely being ignored.

According to COMFREL's pilot survey, students with university-level education still do not pay much attention to participation in elections, stating that they only have their names registered for the elections because of their parents' encouragement and they only follow other people. A question then arises regarding this: if educated youths do not learn about politics and elections, to what extent can unemployed and educated youths get involved?

Cambodia's total population for 2008 is estimated to be approximately 14.6 million.<sup>2</sup> So far, according to unofficial figures from the Ministry of Interior, the number of Cambodian citizens who have not applied for a Cambodian ID card is over 300,000, excluding those citizens who have already applied for it and have only received the receipt as yet. Mr. MAK Sarath, Coordinator of the Youth Council of Cambodia, an organization participating in the election process, education activities, election observation and encouraging youth participation, states that "*some youths are keen to participate in the elections but face obstacles as they*

---

<sup>1</sup> First Revision Population Projection for Cambodia 1998-2020, National Institute of Statistics and Royal University of Phnom Penh, in 'CAMBODIA: Sharing Growth, Equity and Development Report 2007', World Bank, June 2007.

<sup>2</sup> According to IMF estimates at [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org).

*have no identity documents to use to vote.”* Most youth workers can access proper organizations through unions, and receive election-related information, but the majority demand improvements to their livelihoods. During the second mandate commune council elections on April 1, 2007, COMFREL found that some of the 300,000 workers who did not go to vote faced transportation difficulties (short of money) as they did not pay twice to get back to their homeland (for the elections and for Khmer New Year). Most of these work in cities and in neighboring countries, such as Thailand, far from the commune where they have to go to vote.

The number of youth candidates and youths elected at national and commune level nationwide in previous elections is still very low. No parliamentarian is under 30 years of age; there are only 163 youth commune councilors, equal to 1.43% of 11,353 elected councilors nationwide. This figure is derived from calculations based on official results of the 2007 commune council elections. In general, political parties in Cambodia have not paid any attention to encouraging youths to become elected representatives. There appears to have been no attention in political party platforms paid to the priority agenda in the area of youths: adoption of national youth policy, education quality, problems of unemployment, military mobilization etc.

The main political parties in Cambodia should focus on organizing youth movements towards rectifying this situation, while avoiding the previous tendency to form youth movements to serve only the party in question's benefit. No youth policy has been drafted and no youth movement is given any power in decision making in any party.

If encouraged, Cambodian youths are willing to participate in political and social work. Civil society organizations, in particular election monitoring organizations and youth associations, have greatly encouraged youths to participate in election activities. For the 2007 commune council elections, 6,397 observers, equal to 67% of the total number of COMFREL observers, were under 30 years old. Around 700 youths were election observers for the Youth Council of Cambodia and were actively involved in the 2007 commune council elections, such as by participating in voter information notice distribution, disseminating election-related information to voters and observing elections. Youth election observers from NICFEC numbered 4,125, equal to 75% of the total number of NICFEC election observers. Youth election observers from the Khmer Youth Association represented 90% of the total of 451 observers. Most participated voluntarily in election activities without asking for a fee and were committed to working with great physical and moral strength.

In conclusion, there is limited attention paid to youths in Cambodia by political institutions such as political parties, the Royal Government of Cambodia and the National Assembly. Youth influence on the election process is also very limited.

COMFREL, Neak Kloam Meul, Friday, July 13, 2007