

Promoting inclusive parliaments:

The representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament

CASE STUDY / PARLIAMENT / CAMBODIA

The hidden minorities:

Representing ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in Cambodia

Sonia Palmieri



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Inter-Parliamentary Union

5 chemin du Pommier
Case postale 330
CH-1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva, Switzerland

Telephone: +41 22 919 41 50
Fax: +41 22 919 41 60
E-mail: postbox@mail.ipu.org

www.ipu.org

United Nations Development Programme

Democratic Governance Group
Bureau for Development Policy
304 East 45th Street, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10017, USA

Telephone: +1 (212) 906-5000
Fax: +1 (212) 906-5001

www.undp.org/governance

Design and layout: Julian Knott (www.julianknott.com)
Rick Jones (rick@studioexile.com)

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Executive summary

Following a century of conflict, Cambodia has tried to forge a new democratic path. Multiparty elections have been held regularly since 1993, and the two chambers of the parliament—the National Assembly and the Senate—have established their own rules and internal regulations.

Ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples represent a small proportion (approximately 1.4%) of Cambodia's population; indeed, Cambodia is often described as one of the region's most 'homogenous' countries. In Cambodia, ethnic minorities are understood as being those of Chinese, Lao, Thai, Vietnamese or Cham (predominantly Muslim) origin. Indigenous peoples in Cambodia are described as being the 'most ancient inhabitants of the land', with strong cultural and economic ties to their environment. Of the numerous groups described under the umbrella term 'indigenous', some display commonalities, while others are remarkably dissimilar.¹ Despite this diversity of minorities, there are few members of the National Assembly or Senate who identify themselves as representing an ethnic minority group or indigenous peoples. There is a tendency to prioritise national identity over minority identity.

1.4%

Ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples represent a small proportion (approximately 1.4%) of Cambodia's population

While there are various governmental departments with responsibility for minority issues, the parliament has not yet developed institutional mechanisms by which to address these concerns. There is, for example, no specific body such as a commission or parliamentary group to consider minority issues. While minorities are protected under the Constitution, and have had rights enshrined in specific laws relating to land and employment, there is no overarching law to protect minority rights, as recommended by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the respective Convention to which Cambodia is a State Party. Moreover, continuing concerns in minority communities, such as land allocation and low levels of education, illustrate the challenges MPs face in addressing these constituents' concerns at the national level in Cambodia.

Three specific recommendations are suggested to improve the way in which minority voices are included in the Cambodian Parliament: first, the creation of a specialised body on minority affairs, modelled perhaps on the Women's Caucus of the Senate; secondly, strengthening of consultation processes with minority groups and civil society organisations; and thirdly, developing a comprehensive legislative framework for minorities in Cambodia.



Introduction

For more than a century, Cambodia suffered a tumultuous political history evidenced in French colonial rule (1863-1953), Japanese occupation (1941-1945), wars with Vietnam (1970-1979), the genocidal Pol Pot regime (1975-79) and Vietnamese occupation (1979-1989). This period of conflict ended with the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords and the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), the first of its kind to administer an independent state and run an election.

In many ways, UNTAC provided Cambodia with an important opportunity to forge the kind of democratic future that has escaped a number of its neighbouring countries in south-east Asia. Twenty political parties contested the 1993 election and 90 percent of eligible Cambodian voters participated. The election resulted in a Constituent Assembly of 120 members from four political parties.² The Assembly approved a new constitution which established a multiparty liberal democracy in the framework of a constitutional monarchy.³

The Constitution also provided for a wide range of internationally recognised human rights. Article 31 expressly states that all Cambodians share the “same rights, freedoms and obligations regardless of race, colour, sex, language, religious belief, political tendency, birth origin, social status, wealth or other status”.

Since the Constituent Assembly, Cambodia has held three general elections. The number of political parties running has declined at each subsequent election. A total of 39 parties ran in 1998, with three parties winning seats in the National Assembly; 23 parties ran in 2003, three of which won seats; and 11 parties ran candidates in 2008, with five winning seats. The latest election was held on 27 July 2008, resulting in a majority win for the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP).

There are two views about minority representation in Cambodia. The first is that ethnic minorities have been effectively integrated into mainstream Khmer communities and issues or concerns they may

have are no different to those of the general Khmer population. Indeed, as one source noted, it is thanks to the leadership of the former King that minorities have benefitted from national development.

The alternative view is that minorities face significant challenges distinct from those of the rest of the population, and that these are not well addressed by parliament at the national level. Those of this view assert that despite provisions to safeguard indigenous peoples’ land, customs, language and culture, discrimination against minorities in Cambodia remains a continuing cause for concern. Discrimination is manifest in land and resource alienation resulting in forced displacement, limitations on the right to self-determination, inadequate provision of appropriate education and poor access to health care. The Asian Forum for Human Rights Development (AFHRD) considers that “abuses of power by government officials, law enforcement, and the military are commonplace, and vulnerable minorities have become easy targets for profiteering.”⁴

The 1998 Cambodian Population Census identified 17 different groups among an indigenous population of approximately 101,000 people or 0.9 percent of the then total population of 11.4 million.⁵ The Indigenous Peoples NGO Network considers these figures to be conservative as indigenous people are often not able to speak Khmer or do not yet feel confident identifying themselves as indigenous and therefore may not be counted as such in the census.⁶ They have, instead, estimated the indigenous population at 1.4 percent of the total population and count 20 different groups.

There has been some disagreement about where indigenous peoples live in Cambodia. A 2006 governmental study found that the Bunong, Kreung, Jarai, Kaol, Steang, Thmon, Kuoy, Tumpuon, Brao, Kavet, Kachak, Lun, Radaer, Kraol, Mil, Khnong, Por, Suoy and Saoch peoples were living in ten provinces: namely, Mondulkiri; Ratanakiri; Kratie; Stung Treng; Preah Vihear; Kampong Thom; Koh

Introduction

Kong; Pursat; Kampong Speu; and Sihanoukville.⁷ Indeed, in Mondulakiri and Ratanakiri provinces, indigenous peoples comprise the majority of the population. According to the Indigenous Peoples Network, however, Kuoy, Stieng, Por, and Saoch people also live in a further five provinces, notably Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey, Kampong Cham and Siem Reap.⁸

The diverse ethnic minority population is spread across mountainous areas and the lowlands where they are often among or adjacent to Khmers, including the Chinese, Lao, Thai, Vietnamese and Cham. While the first four groups maintain ties with neighbouring countries in the region, the predominantly Muslim Cham people have strong ties to other Islamic countries, including those in the Gulf States.

This case study presents findings from research conducted in Cambodia on the question of how inclusive the National Assembly and Senate are of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. Following an assessment of the current representation levels of minorities in the nation's principal legislative body, the case study explores the channels through which minority representatives are elected and some of the challenges inherent in this

system. The study then turns its attention to the institutional mechanisms of the parliament by which minority affairs are considered and legislated. The case study concludes with an assessment of these practices, and recommendations for improvement.

This case study was prepared on the basis of qualitative research undertaken in Phnom Penh in May 2010. Interviews were conducted with numerous senior parliamentarians from both the National Assembly and Senate of Cambodia, as well as parliamentary staff and individuals from non-government organisations. Responses from questionnaires distributed to Members of Parliament have also been used.

This study is not intended to provide a definitive synopsis of the current state of ethnic minorities and indigenous communities in Cambodia. Rather, the study has a much narrower focus on the institutional mechanisms (working methods, procedures), challenges and opportunities apparent in addressing the concerns of minorities in the Cambodian Parliament. As one of many case studies prepared internationally, it is hoped that this will stimulate parliamentary discussion and action in favour of effective representation of minorities in parliament.

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The 1998 Cambodian Population Census identified 17 different groups among an indigenous population of approximately 101,000 people.



Minority representation in the Parliament

Indigenous representation in the Cambodian Parliament more or less reflects the proportion of indigenous people living in the country. Two of the 123 Members of the National Assembly are indigenous, as are two of the 61 Senators. While all of the indigenous representatives belong to the Cambodian People's Party, they represent three different groups: in the National Assembly, H.E. Rat Sarem is Phnong, while H.E. Bu Thang is Tumpuon. H.E. Senator Seuy Keo is Brao, while H.E. Senator Buy Keuk is Phnong.

Ethnic minority representation, defined as those members from the Cham and Christian groups, is marginally higher. Four members of the National Assembly and four Senators (representing Regions 2, 5 and 8)⁹ are of an ethnic minority. In the Senate, three of the four minority Senators come from the CPP, while the other represents FUNCINPEC. In the National Assembly, all ethnic minorities are from the CPP.

Pathways to Parliament

There are no reserved seats or quotas for minorities in Cambodia. The 123 Members of the National Assembly are elected to 21 multi-member constituencies by a direct vote of those 18 years and over. Voting is not compulsory, but prior registration is required. Voting occurs between 7am and 3pm on the day of the election, and voters are required to tick their preferred party on a ballot. Political parties provide a list of candidates to the National Electoral Commission in advance of the election. Where, for example, there are 18 seats to be contested, a party may provide double that number of candidates. Counting of ballots is done immediately following the closing of polls, in the presence of observers and staff of the National Electoral Commission. The allocation of seats is effected on the basis of



Minority representation in the Parliament

the Hare electoral quotient and remaining seats according to the greatest remainders.

Senators are indirectly elected to represent eight regions (as multi-member constituencies).¹⁰ Of the total 61 Senators, 57 are elected by proportional representation by Commune (*Sangkat*) Councilors while two others are elected by the National Assembly. A further two Senators are appointed by the King. Regions are not all composed of the same number of provinces, and therefore contain varying numbers of Senators.

Minorities face certain challenges in being elected. First, the electoral system determines the number of seats per region on the basis of population size. Those regions with a higher population have a greater number of MPs to represent them. Given the relatively small population size of those regions where minorities predominantly live, there are fewer seats from which minority MPs and Senators may be elected. Secondly, the view that “only three of the eight regions have minority communities,” means that minority candidates have not been fielded by parties or elected in regions (such as Regions 4 and 7) where the 2006 governmental report identified minorities also lived.¹¹ Thirdly, to be eligible to run for election in Cambodia, a candidate must speak Khmer, despite many minorities speaking only their indigenous/ethnic language.

When asked about common obstacles to the election or appointment of minority MPs, Senators of non-minority background frequently pointed to minorities’ lack of finances, support from political parties, education, confidence, family support, and support from the electorate. Cham minority Senators, however, were more likely to refer to religion and prevailing cultural attitudes towards minorities.

The election (or appointment) of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples depends primarily on the political parties. “Where political parties place minorities at the top of their candidate lists, they will be elected”, one Senator said. The Secretary

Indigenous representation in the Cambodian Parliament more or less reflects the proportion of indigenous people living in the country – Ethnic minority representation is marginally higher.

General of the Senate agreed, but noted the difficulty in finding appropriate candidates due to lower levels of education among minority peoples. He said families of minorities were not always supportive of a career in politics, and this was especially the case for women who had the double burden of family and work responsibilities. It is perhaps no coincidence that no minority MP is a woman in Cambodia. He concluded that raising the profile of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples depended on the political will of the parties.

It is noteworthy that most of the minorities represented in the National Assembly belong to the Cham, a group which is regarded by many as well integrated in Khmer society. In interviews, many Cham MPs identified themselves as “Khmer-Islam”. A number of these MPs had strong experience in the workings of government before they entered the National Assembly, having worked in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, or with the police department.

Other groups, however, have different decision-making structures to those recognised by Khmer society. For example, the ILO has noted that “indigenous peoples in Cambodia have a rich tradition of collective decision-making reflected in strong social cohesion in the communal group and often, communal meetings places in the centre of the villages where all affairs related to the village are discussed and decided.”¹² This model tends to conflict with administrative structures such as village chiefs, and commune, district and provincial authorities imposed from Phnom Pehn.

Inclusivity of Parliament

Leadership and infrastructure

Some minority MPs have been appointed to certain positions of parliamentary authority. In the Senate, for example, two senators from the Cham and Phnong minorities hold the respective positions of chair and deputy chair of Senate committees. Mr Sman Teath, of the Cham minority, is the vice-Chair of the Commission on Economy, Finance, Banking and Audit in the National Assembly.

There is no specific body—be it a cross party caucus or commission—to address minority concerns. While this absence was acknowledged, some MPs pointed to the ability of minority MPs' to contribute to decision-making processes within their political parties. A Senator from the CPP noted that when considering bills that could have an effect on ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, the party would consult with minority Senators on these issues.

Without a specialised body, however, the parliament has a reduced capacity to oversee the government's national machinery for minorities. The Royal Government's Inter-Ministerial Committee for Ethnic Minorities Development and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Highland Peoples Development were established to address minority and Indigenous issues. Non-government organisations have noted the overlapping and inconsistent mandates of these committees, as well as an apparent lack of political will to strengthen them. In this context, a parliamentary body could potentially harmonise these committees' objectives and streamline outcomes.

Legislating on behalf of minorities

The internal rules and regulations of the Cambodian Parliament outline the process by which legislation can be considered and debated. When a bill arrives from the Royal Government, the National Assembly refers it to its Permanent Committee.

This Committee is composed of 12 members: the President and two Vice Presidents of the National Assembly, and each of the Chairs of the nine Commissions. The Permanent Committee decides which Commission should review the bill. The chosen Commission reviews the bill with respect to its constitutionality, and recommends whether the bill should be debated in the plenary session. In making this recommendation, the Commission may hold a seminar with stakeholders. The general public, the media and non-government organisations may be invited to listen. There is, however, some variability in the way each Commission conducts these consultations. Commissions do not normally propose changes to the bill. Bills passed by the National Assembly must also be approved by the Senate.

According to the internal rules of the Senate, Senators may also initiate a bill. Any such bill would be then passed to a Permanent Committee for its verification. Senate Commissions also inquire into the constitutionality of the bill, any potential duplication with other laws, and the impact of the bill on society. Once the Commission is satisfied that the bill does not breach any of these conditions, it will be sent to the National Assembly for its assent. Once the National Assembly approves the bill so does the Senate. To date, three laws initiated by the Senate have been passed: The Law on Parliamentary Staff, the Electoral Law for the Senate and the Senate's internal rules.

While these processes are well established in the rules of the parliament, their implementation has been difficult. On some occasions, bills may be passed by the Senate with little debate. Legislative oversight through commissions is also limited. Commissions in Cambodia currently conduct field trips to the provinces to learn more about issues first hand. These, however, tend to be discussions with politicians at the commune level, rather than the general public. While these are valuable, direct consultations with the community and non-government organisations would improve the

Inclusivity of Parliament

parliament's connection to the people it represents, and notably on issues affecting minorities and indigenous peoples.

The policy framework for ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in Cambodia is also complex. Minority rights are protected under Article 31 of the Constitution and under specific sections of the *Land Law 2001*, the *Forestry Law 2002*, and numerous sub-laws, decrees and *parkas* relate to minorities specifically.¹³

With respect to international standards, Cambodia has signed the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and voted in favour of UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the UN General Assembly. While it has signed the ILO's Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111), it has not signed the ILO's Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (No. 169).

In meeting its obligations under the CERD, Cambodia has experienced some difficulty in preparing its reports and presenting itself before the Committee. After a ten year absence, Cambodia presented and discussed six periodic reports with the Committee in February 2010. While appreciative of this effort, the Committee voiced concern with the treatment of minorities in Cambodia. On the issue of legislation in particular it noted a "lack of uniform and faithful implementation and enforcement of laws" and recommended that legislation be completed to ensure that definition is legally entrenched and widely disseminated and understood by all.¹⁴

International pressure notwithstanding, the Secretary General of the Senate considered that it "was not the right time" to introduce a law on minorities in Cambodia. He cited "priority areas", before the passage of a law, being the improvement of education levels, building of schools in

Without a specialised body, however, the parliament has a reduced capacity to oversee the government's national machinery for minorities.

ethnic areas, and teaching minorities to engage with Khmer institutions.

Representing minority issues

The parliamentarians from minority backgrounds appear to face certain challenges in raising minority issues in the Cambodian Parliament. In the first instance, there is some pressure on these MPs to identify more with their Cambodian (Khmer) nationality than their ethnicity.¹⁵

Due in part to the absence of institutional mechanisms by which to address or oversee minority issues in Cambodia, MPs appear to have limited familiarity with the reality of indigenous peoples' and ethnic minorities' lives. The disjuncture is also attributable to the fact that minorities are rarely consulted before government decisions that affect their lives are made.¹⁶ Two issues illustrate this disjuncture: land and language.

Explaining the land situation in Cambodia, National Assembly MPs noted that the Ministry of Land Management and Construction had allocated land to minorities and that subsistence farming had now been replaced with cattle farming and rice cultivation. Moreover, MPs felt that indigenous peoples' connection to the land had been sensitively catered to.

Chapter 3, section 2 of the *Land Law 2001*, requires that indigenous communities be recognised as

97%

Most minorities do not speak Khmer and education levels in these communities are very low. A recent study in Monduliri province found 97 percent of Bunong women and 86 percent of Bunong men were unable to read or write.



Inclusivity of Parliament

Language concerns separate MPs from their minority constituents. MPs noted a general preference in the community to speak Khmer.

- legal entities to be eligible for collective ownership of their lands. The land law states that immoveable property of the state may be provided to natural persons or legal entities of Khmer nationality.¹⁷ Minorities are required to declare themselves as such, and agree by consensus on the name of their group. Land claims also require proof of a traditional way of life and economic living, and specific land management techniques.

Non-government organisations, however, have expressed concern at the weakness of the protection measures in the policy.¹⁸ In the first instance, there have been reports of concessions being granted on land traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples without full consideration, or exhaustion of procedures provided for, under the land law and relevant sub-decrees. For example, non-government organisations have observed that “forest and farming land, on which the life of ethnic minority people depends, was contracted by the government to private companies as economic concession land for rubber plantations or for mining”.¹⁹ Land has also been granted following intimidation and acts of violence against indigenous peoples during forced evictions or land disputes affecting them. Reports have been made about officials pressing charges against and arresting indigenous villagers, when they protest against their forced eviction or contest the granting of a concession on indigenous land.²⁰

Similarly, language concerns separate MPs from their minority constituents. MPs noted a general preference in the community to speak Khmer.

Cham MPs, for example, noted that Khmer was spoken when meeting constituents in the communes, and was the language in which loudspeaker announcements were broadcast. MPs also referred to the general preference of young people to learn Khmer, followed by international languages such as English or French, over their own tribal/communal languages.

Yet most minorities do not speak Khmer and education levels in these communities are very low. A recent study in Mondulkiri province found 97 percent of Bunong women and 86 percent of Bunong men were unable to read or write.²¹ Admission and enrolment rates in Mondulkiri and Ratanakiri provinces are below the national level and the repetition and drop out rates are higher than the national average.²² While some bilingual education programs have been trialled, an ILO official considered that these trials had been repeatedly carried out in only one province, without sufficient funding and thus, unsuccessfully.



Incorporating minority voices: The way forward for Cambodia

In the aftermath of a long and violent period of conflict, Cambodia has begun to rebuild its political, economic and social institutions. With the help of the international community, projects to strengthen the capacity of the national parliament, as well as representative bodies at the provincial and district level continue to create links between the people and those they elect.

There are, however, challenges in the way Cambodia includes its minority populations in mainstream democratic structures and policies. The following recommendations suggest a path for more accountable and effective inclusion of minority concerns in the work of the National Assembly and Senate:

1. Create a specialised body on minorities

Many parliaments have found that a commission or caucus specifically focussed on indigenous or ethnic peoples is a valuable mechanism by which to advocate for, and highlight, this constituency's concerns. These bodies also serve to oversee the mainstreaming of legislation as well as government programmes and policies to ensure they do not discriminate against minorities, and reflect the particular needs of indigenous and minority peoples.

In the case of Cambodia, establishing a specialised body would also serve to harmonise the overlapping and sometimes contradictory work of the Government's Inter-Ministerial Committee for Ethnic Minorities Development and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Highland Peoples Development. Heeding the lessons of bodies elsewhere in the region, such a body should have a clear framework and work plan, and adequate parliamentary support. A good model would be that provided in the Senate by the Women's Caucus which, as of March 2010, is supported by a Gender Affairs Unit staffed by the Department of the Senate.

2. Allow stronger parliamentary consultation with minorities

While the creation of a specific body would be a significant step towards more inclusivity, the mechanisms by which commissions consult the public, and minorities more particularly, also require strengthening. At present, grassroots consultation and mainstreaming of their concerns does not occur in a systematic or rigorous way. Stronger consultation would go a long way to understanding the reality of minorities' lives, and would give minorities a chance to have a say in the development of programs aimed at improving their condition. Greater consultation by the parliament's commissions (or specialised body on minorities) with civil society organisations which tend to have strong access to ethnic minority communities is also highly desirable. Capacity building and training in how to conduct public consultations should be provided by international organisations.

3. Legislate at the national level

While the Cambodian Constitution clearly states that minorities cannot be discriminated against, and a number of laws have specific clauses relating to minorities and indigenous peoples, the institutional framework by which these laws are both implemented and monitored should be upgraded. A dedicated law on ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples would constitute not only a symbolic gesture to these minorities of the Government heeding their concerns, but would ensure a more comprehensive protection of their rights. The Government would benefit from the lessons learned globally on legislating for minority rights, and resources should be devoted to this. →

Annex A: List of interviews

Members of Parliament

- H.E. Mr Chheang Vun, Chairman Commission on Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation, Information and Media

Other members in attendance:

H.E. Sman Teath, H.E. Tres Sarom, H.E. Sarn Inthor, H.E. Sales Sean, H.E. Zakarya Adam, H.E. Kateu Toyeb

- H.E. Cheam Yeap, Special Representative of the National Assembly President and Chair, Commission on Economy, Finance, Banking and Audit

Other members in attendance:

H.E. Ly Kim Leang, H.E. Chuun Sarim, H.E. Khek Sam On, H.E. Chay Borin, H.E. Chhim Ma

- H.E. Senator Ouk Bounchhoeun, Chair, Commission on Judiciary and Justice.
- H. E. Senator Sabu Bacha, Chair, Commission on Public works, Transportation, Civil Aviation, Telecommunication, Post, Industry, Mines, Energy, Commerce, Land Mangement, Urbanization and Construction
- H.E. Mu Sochua, Party Whip, Sam Rainsy Party
- H.E. Ly Srey Vina

Parliamentary staff

- H.E. Leng Peng Long, Secretary General of the National Assembly
- H. E. Oum Sarith, Secretary General of the Senate
- Mr Oudam Khlang, Director of International Relations, National Assembly

Civil society organisations

- Mr Sek Sophorn, National Project Director, Support to Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia, International Labour Organisation
- Ms Susan Cowley, Director, Legislative Assistance Programme (LEAP), UNDP Cambodia

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- 6 Indigenous People NGO Network (IPNN), 2010, *The Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia*, Report coordinated by the NGO Forum on Cambodia, in cooperation with the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), for the 76th Session of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, New York, p. 2. This uncertainty in the figures was of particular concern to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in February 2010, when it requested the "State party include in its next periodic report disaggregated data on ethnic minorities, including indigenous minorities, and on their socio-economic status."
- 7 Ministry of Rural Development, National Statistics Institute and Commune Database, cited in IPNN, 2010, *The Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia*, p. 3.
- 8 IPNN, 2010, *The Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia*, p. 3.
- 9 Provinces in these regions include: Kampong Cham (Region 2); Takeo, Kampot, Kep (Region 5); and Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Kratie, Stoek Treng, Ratanakiri and Mudulkiri (Region 8).
- 10 Region 1: Phnom Penh; Region 2: Kampong Cham, Region 3: Kandal, Region 4: Batdamborg, Udormeanchey, Siem Reap, Banteaymeanchey and Pailin; Region 5: Takeo, Kampot, Kep; Region 6: Prey Veng, Svay Reang; Region 7: Kampong Speu, Kampong Chnang, Po Sat, Koh Kong, Preah Sihanuk; Region 8: Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Kratie, Stoek Treng, Ratanakiri and Mudulkiri.
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- 12 Kristina Chhim, *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples and Poverty Reduction in Cambodia*, ILO, 2005, pp. 9-10
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About the project

Promoting inclusive parliaments: The representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament

Many situations around the world demonstrate that an adequate representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in policy- and decision-making by society is instrumental in breaking the cycle of discrimination and exclusion suffered by members of these groups, and their ensuing disproportionate levels of poverty.

Yet minorities and indigenous peoples often remain excluded from effective participation in decision-making, including at the level of the national parliament. One of the criteria for a democratic parliament is that it should reflect the social diversity of the population. A parliament which is unrepresentative in this sense will leave some social groups and communities feeling disadvantaged in the political process or even excluded altogether, with consequences for the quality of public life or the stability of the political system and society in general.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are undertaking a project which aims to understand and promote the effective representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament. The objectives of the project are to:

- Increase knowledge of the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament
- Provide tools for parliaments and other stakeholders to promote inclusive parliaments
- Build capacity to advocate for more inclusive parliaments

The project is funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for the period 2008-2010. More information is available at www.ipu.org/minorities-e and <http://www.agora-parl.org/node/1061>.

Case studies

Case studies are being carried out in selected parliaments in every geographic region. Case studies aim to gather first hand experiences from parliaments on working methods, procedures, challenges and opportunities for working towards more inclusive parliaments. Interviews with leading actors inside and outside parliament inform the preparation of each case study.

The case studies seek to:

- Describe the current level and historical trends of representation of minorities and indigenous people in parliament, including from a gender and social perspective.
- Investigate the main challenges that minority or indigenous representatives face as members of parliament.
- Identify how parliament as an institution seeks to include minorities and indigenous peoples in its work.
- Identify examples of good practice, and highlight particular challenges to be addressed.



Inter-Parliamentary Union

The House of Parliaments
5 chemin du Pommier
Case postale 330
CH-1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva, Switzerland

Telephone: +41 22 919 41 50
Fax: +41 22 919 41 60
E-mail: postbox@mail.ipu.org

www.ipu.org



United Nations Development Programme

One United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017, USA

Telephone: +1 (212) 906-5000
Fax: +1 (212) 906-5001

www.undp.org

Office of the Permanent Observer of the IPU to the United Nations

Inter-Parliamentary Union
220 East 42nd Street – Suite 3002
New York, N.Y. 10017
United States of America

Telephone: +1 212 557 58 80
Fax: +1 212 557 39 54
E-mail: ny-office@mail.ipu.org

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