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Paper No. 11
Safeguarding Human Rights in Cambodia: Opportunities and Challenges

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First of all, I wish at the outset to take this opportunity to express my most sincere appreciation to the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) for inviting me to participate in the Seminar on Media and Human Rights. It is my great pleasure to have this opportunity to share my views on the topic “Safeguarding Human Rights in Cambodia: Opportunities and Challenges.”

This paper is divided into three parts. First, a background of human rights situation as well as political and institutional developments in Cambodia will be offered. Second, the paper will discuss the opportunities for safeguarding human rights and the promotion of democracy in this war-torn country. Third, a discussion of the challenges for safeguarding human rights in a transitional Cambodia will be analyzed. Finally, some reflections on the prospects for strengthening human rights and democracy in Cambodia will be articulated.

I. Background

Arguably, Cambodia is one of the very few countries in the world that had more experience with human tragedies—one after the other since the overthrow of the Sihanouk regime in 1970 by General Lon Nol and the devastating destruction of the society—than any country. The destruction began with Nixon doctrine when the US began its illegal bombings of Cambodia in the late 1960s. By 1970, the Sihanouk regime was overthrown by General Lon Nol, which followed by a civil war for the next five years between the Khmer Rouge the Khmer Republic which was set up by Lon Nol. In 1975, the civil war ended with the Khmer Rouge winning the battle. Once they were in power, the Khmer Rouge began implementing its most violent revolution, killing most of the educated Cambodians. During its reign of terror, the Khmer Rouge committed what is now being called “democide”—the killing of the people by their own government regardless of race, ethnic background, religion, and whatsoever. It was during this period that Cambodia suffered the most serious human rights violations when almost two millions died at the hand of the Khmer Rouge through its various means. In 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia to oust the Khmer Rouge from power. The Cambodian conflict was further escalated and prolonged until 1991.

Nevertheless, the notion of state in Cambodia today was constructed in 1979. While in some respects, this notion of state has changed many aspects of it remain the same, twenty years later. The elections in 1993 and 1998 brought about some fundamental
changes, especially in terms of the political system, leadership, democracy, rule of law, freedom, human rights, and free market economy. Between 1979 and 1989, Cambodia was essentially a socialist, controlled state. Cambodia was viewed as leaning toward the former Soviet Union, the former eastern bloc and Vietnam. During this period, Cambodia was in essence a one-party state in which the government and the party had absolute power and control.

In 1989, Cambodia began for the first time to open up politically, diplomatically and economically. It was in 1989 that the PRK was re-named the State of Cambodia (SOC). People began to enjoy more freedom and rights. After the October 1991 Paris Peace Accord, Cambodia was temporarily placed under the auspices of the United Nations. SOC lasted until the arrival of the first batch of the UN peacekeeping forces in March 1992. Between March 1992 and November 1993, while Cambodia was symbolically under the leadership of the Supreme National Council of Cambodia (SNC), the real exercise rested with the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and SOC. In May 1993, UNTAC successfully organized the first free and fair elections in the recent history of Cambodia. As a result of the 1993 elections, the constitution of Cambodia was written and the National Assembly was set up, followed by the formation of a coalition Royal Government of Cambodia. In the 1993 elections, twenty political parties participated. Out of these twenty political parties, four parties—FUNCINPEC, the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP), and MOLINAKA—won seats.

Once the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) was established, the processes of change—in all aspects—began to take place. Cambodia was no longer a single-party state; it had become a pluralistic society in its own context. While Cambodia attempted to embrace democratic culture, values and ideas, the country continued to face political instability and the problem of the Khmer Rouge, which in 1994 was officially outlawed. The challenge to political stability in Cambodia emanated mainly from mistrust, misperceptions and the impacts of a long history of conflict and factionalism, as well as insecurity in certain areas of the country in which the Khmer Rouge were still active.

Both the Royal Government of Cambodia and the National Assembly were set up in 1993. The key actors which emerged from the 1993 elections included H.M. King Norodom Sihanouk, leaders of the National Assembly (Samdech Chea Sim, Chairman; H.E. Loy Sim Chheang, First Vice Chairman; H.E. Son Soubert, Second Vice Chairman; and other senior leaders), and leaders of the Royal Government (Samdech Krom Preah Norodom Ranariddh, First Prime Minister; Samdech Hun Sen, Second Prime Minister; H.E. Sar Kheng, Deputy Prime Minister; and H.R.H. Sdech Krom Khun Norodom Sirivudh, Deputy Prime Minister; and other senior government leaders). By 1994, several government leaders and members of the National Assembly were either forced to resign or quit their posts as they were frustrated over the increasingly difficult situation in the country. The tensions between the two major parties increased and eventually led to the fighting in July 1997.
The brief “July 1997 events,” as they were called, caused major disruptions to the country. It was certainly a major setback for Cambodia’s fragile democracy and image nationally, regionally and internationally. Some of the donors’ assistance and projects were either suspended or terminated. The picture for Cambodia in the period between the second part of 1997 and almost all of 1998 was gloomy and uncertain.

The other key players during this period were the leaders of the military and police as well as the courts. No doubt, the military and police could have played a more constructive role in promoting and advancing human rights and democracy in Cambodia during this period since the departure of UNTAC. Some of the human rights violations were either committed by the military or the police or both, especially in the period immediately following the July 1997 fighting. These human rights violations were documented by the UN Center for Human Rights and the local human rights organizations.

While 1997 was a critical year for Cambodia, 1998 was even a major test for the survival of human rights and democracy as the country prepared to organize its own elections for the first time in the contemporary history of this country. During this process of electoral preparations and organization, two key institutions—the National Election Committee (NEC) and the Constitutional Council (CC)—were set up. While the Constitutional Council was in charge of judicial review, the National Election Committee was responsible for organizing the national elections. It is important to note that Cambodia did not have any electoral law when the NEC was set up in early 1998. The key institutions that were responsible for drafting these laws were mainly the Ministry of Interior and the Council of Ministers. The legislation process of various election-related laws was complex. Nor was it easy for the government to set up the National Election Committee when Cambodia was in fact still in political crisis. At this time, most members of the FUNCINPEC Party were still in exile. For the 1998 elections, thirty-nine political parties contested in the elections. The elections were competitive and only three parties won seats in the National Assembly.

Fortunately, through a combination of hard-work, determination and perseverance, and the support of the international community, Cambodia was able to manage the almost impossible tasks of conducting the election in July 1998 and then forming a new coalition government in November of the same year. Before the new coalition Royal Government was set up, Cambodia once again faced a deepening political crisis because of violent demonstrations and the lack of an absolute majority for the winning party in the election to form the government. The Cambodian constitution requires a vote of confidence by two thirds of the National Assembly in order to form a government. To set up the new government after the July 1998 election Cambodia had to wait several months as the two major political parties—CCP and FUNCINPEC—worked out a power-sharing arrangement.

1 For detailed information, consult the reports of the UN Center for Human Rights and some local human rights organizations such as ADHOC and LICHADO.
2 Some members of the FUNCINPEC Party fled the country after the July 1997 fighting for fear of being killed.
Since the formation of the new government on November 30, 1998, Cambodia has made significant progress toward greater reforms and accountability, as well as the consolidation of peace and stability, especially with the demise of the Khmer Rouge. New political institutions were established. They include the Senate and several new ministries. The government also increased the number of senior ministerial positions for all the ministries and national secretariats. While the leadership of this country remains the same for the most part, some of the individual leaders of the new government have changed.

On the other hand, the non-governmental institutions and actors emerged much later than the government. This report will focus only on the local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) and actors rather than dealing with the international non-governmental institutions. Throughout the 1980s, Cambodia was isolated from the world, not by its own choice but by the complexity of the Cold War politics. At the time the only non-governmental organizations that were present and active were INGOs. Their roles in contributing to the relief and rehabilitation of the country were instrumental. The local non-governmental organizations, however, were not established yet, in part due to the political environment and the impact of war and violent revolution of the Khmer Rouge regime. Cambodian non-governmental organizations began to emerge only after the October 1991 Paris Peace Accord, with the arrival of the international peacekeeping forces in Cambodia. During the UNTAC period between 1992 and 1993, as a result of the opening up of the country and the flow of foreign assistance to Cambodia, local NGOs started to mushroom.

It is important to note that most local NGOs set up during that time concentrated on human rights, democracy, elections, and relief work. To be sure, the local NGOs were not especially proactive and were few in number. They were in fact overshadowed by the international NGOs during this early period. At the same time, the local NGOs were too weak because they lacked funds, human resources, experience, and direction. In addition, the main concerns of the country at the time were the political issues of the day—how to implement the mandate of the Paris Peace Accord to ensure peace and stability, organization of the election, and disarmament.

During this period, UNTAC, with the support and cooperation of the so-called existing administrative structures (namely, the State of Cambodia), was the only institution that was really in charge of managing the situation. In essence, Cambodia was in transition. But one of the most important mandates of the UNTAC at the time was the organization of the election, which by the mid-point of its operations became the cornerstone of the UN effort in Cambodia. Another important aspect of the United Nations in Cambodia was its role in human rights and democracy. In fact, one of the UNTAC’s main

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3 More research on the roots and development of civil society in Cambodia is needed. But the notion of NGOs is only being introduced in the 1990s. For further discussion on Cambodia’s civil society, see Kao Kim Hourn, “Emerging Civil Society in Cambodia: Opportunities and Challenges,” The Conference Working Paper Series, (Phnom Penh: Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 1999).
components was human rights. The promotion for respect of human rights and the advancement of freedom and democracy during this period were vital.

Both Cambodians and non-Cambodians alike were overly conscious about past serious human rights violations, especially during the Khmer Rouge era. Thus, human right issues became not only hot issues but also the main area in which some local NGOs began to focus their work. Some of the major local NGOs during this early period included Khemara, ADHOC, LICHADO, Vigilance, and Outreach. But, by 1994 and 1995, the number of local NGOs had already reached more than 100 and the issues and problems they addressed also expanded considerably.

It would be a mistake, however, to only concentrate this paper on the birth and development of NGOs in Cambodia. To really capture the big picture, this study has broadened its scope and orientation to include the overall movement and emergence of civil society. While there is no consensus on the definition of civil society, most agree that the concept of “civil society” is comprehensive and inclusive. In this regard, the key actors and institutions in the development and movement of civil society in Cambodia are numerous. The first group in civil society is NGOs. The NGOs were perhaps one of the most visible groups before, during and after the UNTAC. The second group is the political parties. In 1993, twenty political parties participated in the election. In 1998, thirty-nine parties contested in the election. Cambodian political parties, like political parties throughout the world, need to compete freely and fairly in elections. The political parties could challenge each other’s political platform and, at the same time, raise important issues to the people and the country. The third group that belongs to civil society is the independent media. Since Cambodia began to open up in 1992, the independent media—including print and visual press—has proliferated significantly. The number of opposition newspapers has increased along with opposition radio and television stations.

Another group of civil society is the trade unions. Before the labor law went into effect in 1997, the number of trade unions and federations of trade unions was already remarkable. By the time the labor law took effect, the number of officially registered trade unions jumped to more than thirty. The fifth group of civil society is the think tanks and research institutes. Policy research institutes, academic institutions or think tanks such as the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace and the Cambodia Development Resource Institute play a vital role in producing policy studies, providing training and stimulating public debate on issues of significant interest to the decision-makers and leaders of the country.

In sum, the leaders and representatives of various institutions such as NGOs, media, trade unions, political parties, and policy research think tanks have been the key actors in the development of grassroots democracy in Cambodia since the early 1990s.

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4 Some people have argued that the political parties are not members of civil society because they seek power. Still others contend that they are members of civil society only when they are not members of the government. Once they are in the government they are no longer members of civil society.
Since the government was formed last year, Cambodia has been able to consolidate peace and political stability and embark on economic development. The new government, which is known as “the economic government” and led by Samdech Hun Sen as the Prime Minister, focuses on several key policies. First, the government wanted its domestic policy to be further improved, especially with regard to security and reforms. With respect to this domestic policy and the need to move ahead with military and police reform, the Prime Minister resigned from his post as the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. At the same time, the Prime Minister wanted all illegal activities to stop, including the on-going logging activities, kidnappings, and illegal checkpoints throughout the country. Second, the Prime Minister wanted his government to give greater attention to economic policy, especially the need to mobilize internal revenues for the government. In this context, the Prime Minister made the Consultative Meeting in Tokyo in February 1999 his top priority. At the Tokyo meeting, his government received total pledges in the amount of 470 million US dollars for 1999. Third, Samdech Hun Sen wanted to concentrate the new government’s efforts on reviving Cambodia’s foreign policy. In this respect, Cambodia was able to resume its seat at the United Nations. In the meantime, Cambodia continued to lobby and negotiate to be admitted as a full member of ASEAN in Hanoi in December 1998. Cambodia, however, did not succeed in securing ASEAN membership until April 30, 1999.

During the five-month period since the formation of the government late last year, Prime Minister Hun Sen has been able to succeed in several fronts, despite the many challenges. First, he has been able to stabilize the political situation in a country that had been known for its lack of peace and stability. Second, by successfully forming the government, Prime Minister Hun Sen was able to re-occupy Cambodia’s seat at the United Nations which had been vacant for some time. Third, his government was able to secure foreign assistance during the Consultative Group meeting in Tokyo. Fourth, Cambodia was able to set up a Senate, a new political institution, after several long months of uncertainty and political maneuverings. Fifth, the Hun Sen government was able to benefit from the demise of the Khmer Rouge when the last group of senior members of the Khmer Rouge defected to the government. Lastly, Cambodia was finally admitted into ASEAN as the 10th full member in Hanoi.

Under the leadership of Samdech Krom Preah Norodom Ranariddh, the National Assembly, on the other hand, has been able to play its own role as well. One of the most noticeable achievements so far has been its ability to get members of the government to answer some of the questions from members of the National Assembly. The National Assembly was also able to debate and adopt a number of laws, including the 1999 Budget Law. It appeared that the National Assembly has become more independent from the executive branch in recent months. This is important if Cambodia is to have a real check-and-balance system in place. According one of the interviewees, “the Standing Committee of the National Assembly has raised an important viewed that the National Assembly must aim to build itself as the center of democracy and the respect of human rights.” At the same time, this interviewee stated that “the Commission on Human Rights
of the National Assembly must attempt to resolve all of the people’s complaints about the abuses of human rights so that social justice can be promoted.”

During this recent period, the Senate was set up under the leadership of Samdech Chea Sim. So far, the Senate has met several times to discuss mainly its own internal rules and regulations, as well as other key issues. The role of the Senate has not, therefore, really been tested because it is too new. The assessment timeframe should be at least one term to see if the Senate is strong enough to act as another real balancing actor.

Finally, besides the reforms which the government has pledged to the donors, the key questions to be asked and monitored closely during this period in order to help improve the overall human rights in Cambodia are:

(1) How will the Khmer Rouge trial be conducted and how many Khmer Rouge leaders will be put on trial? Will the justice and peace work together?;

(2) How will the demobilization program and the overall military reform be implemented initially and carried out? Will the police and judicial reforms take place before the end of this century?;

(3) How will the Senate play its role when it meets to discuss substantive issues? How much power does it really have?;

(4) Will the coalition government continue to work well together during the next several years of its mandate? How much is the government really committed to reforms and the rule of law?;

(5) How will the government and the national assembly legislate the NGO law in the coming years?;

(6) How will the government and other related institutions conduct the commune elections either late this year or early next year? What impact will the commune elections make with respect to peace, stability and national reconciliation?;

(7) How committed will the government be to its various reform packages which are critical to the re-engineering of the government?; and

(8) How will the government kick-start the economy once again, after the twin shocks of 1997? Will the government be able to re-stimulate the private sector investment?

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5 It was reported in the press recently that during his term as Prime Minister of Cambodia Samdech Hun Sen would not legislate the NGO law. National Assembly President Samdech Krom Preah Norodom Ranariddh also stated as reported in the press that he encouraged the National Assembly and the government to work closely with the NGOs.
These are some of the important questions that need to take into consideration, even though this report is supposed to concentrate on grassroots democracy. It is essentially to put things in broader perspective.

At present, non-governmental organizations and civil society are playing critical roles in the development of this country along with the government. The civil society certainly includes many different groups. They include NGOs, the media, trade unions, political parties, think tanks, and academic institutions. Today, the government, the people and the donor community have recognized their roles. They are very visible in terms of implementing projects and programs throughout the country. While civil society plays different roles depending on the background, missions and objectives of each institution and organization, members of civil society can engage in a wide range of activities including providing relief assistance, capacity building, human rights, democracy, women’s issues, development, policy debate, monitoring, advocacy, and research. With more than 300 NGOs, Cambodian civil society has been extremely active and proactive in the past several years. They have gained momentum, experience, credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the government, the people, and the donor community.

For the remaining part of this century, key issues to be closely watched for the development of civil society in the promotion of human rights, development and democracy are:

1. the NGO law;

2. the tax law and the NGOs;

3. status of future funds for all members of civil society, especially the NGOs;

4. the consolidation versus fragmentation of civil society in the future;

5. civil society’s relations with development, the government, and the donor community;

6. the role of civil society with respect to the development of grassroots democracy;

7. the role of civil society regarding the promotion of human rights and advancement of democracy; and

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According to government source, as of June 1998 there were a total number of 296 NGOs that had registered with the government. Out 296 NGOs, 133 are international NGOs, 159 are local NGOs, and 4 are NGO peak bodies. At the same time, the government estimated that there are more 100 NGOs that have not registered with the government. The total budget for 1997 was more than US$71 million and, for 1998, it was more than US$82 million. The budget for local NGOs, however, was about US$9 million in 1997 and more than US$6 million in 1998. See Royal Government of Cambodia, Non-Governmental Organizations in Cambodia 1998 (Phnom Penh: Council for the Development of Cambodia, 1998), p. 1.
the evolution of civil society in Cambodia; will it be weakened or strengthened?

II. Opportunities for Safeguarding Human Rights and the Promotion of Democracy in Cambodia

This paper has identified some key issues that are of significant value in considering strengths and opportunities, challenges and threats for democratization and human rights in Cambodia.

First, Cambodian democracy during the period between 1993 and 1999 has been like a baby growing up on the daily basis. While Cambodia has experienced some critical challenges such as political instability in the past, the dilemma of mistrust, the lack of serious reforms, and the strengthening of a culture of impunity, the people of this country from every walk of life are committed to democracy. They have been very conscious of the “mega” changes in the region and the world—the wave of democracy and free market economies bolstered by the availability of information, and the impact of globalization. At the same time, since the end of the Cold War, the role of civil society has been increasingly recognized.

Second, both external and internal pressures have opened up Cambodian society. Cambodia is no longer the closed society it used to be before 1989. With the impacts of globalization, Cambodia cannot afford to be isolated from the rest of the world. Between the past isolationist policy and the current integrationist approach, it is now clear that Cambodia has opted for integration in the hope that Cambodia will be able to benefit enormously from such an endeavor. Opening up Cambodian society will help contribute to the internationalization of the country and bring the young generation of Cambodia a step closer to the doorstep of knowledge, skills and information technology.

Third, before the arrival of the international peacekeeping forces, it was not possible to learn anything about human rights and democracy because the state, under the influence of the socialist/communist party, did not permit it. Now, Cambodia has a liberal press law, media freedom, and freedom of expression. In addition, the people can organize demonstrations, participate in strikes, or express their opposition views.

Fourth, two elections were successfully organized in 1993 and 1998. Many argued that these elections met international standards for free and fair elections and in pursuit of democracy for the people of this country. Thus, the two Cambodian elections provided valuable experience and lessons, and laid down an important foundation for the development and growth of grassroots democracy.

Fifth, some have argued that the current government is a transparent, open, responsible government. While limited in certain areas, the Royal Government of Cambodia has opened up. In part, the government was responding to the pressures from within and from without, especially from the donor community. The positive attitude of the government has been shown in its willingness to work with the donor countries and institutions as
well as civil society in Cambodia. The government is to be acknowledged for its support of the work of civil society and for its role in promoting democracy and human rights.

Sixth, political parties that elected members in the last election can now make demands on the government in the meetings of the National Assembly. For example, the government recently had to respond to the questions that were put forward by members of the National Assembly before the Ministry of Interior, which had to explain the security situation in the country.

Seventh, everyone—including politicians and the people of Cambodia—have received more information and developed an understanding with regard to human rights and democracy through seminars, meetings, television, radio or newspapers in recent years. If this trend continues for some time, the development of grassroots democracy will be enhanced further.

Eighth, whether people from every political spectrum support, adopt or reject democracy, the fact is that grassroots democracy in Cambodia has developed and reached a significant number of people already. This process will not reverse itself.

Ninth, independent media has proliferated; promotion and training programs on human rights and democracy have helped to educate the people, including military, police, and civil servants, throughout the country. The impacts of human rights and democracy education have been far reaching.

Tenth, at present, Cambodian people have a better understanding regarding their democratic freedom and legal rights. In both 1998 and 1999, there have been an increasing number of demonstrations, strikes and peace marches. Cambodian people—including students and workers—have demanded their rights and freedom. In essence, despite various shortcomings, grassroots democracy in Cambodia has developed and reached a point of no return.

III. Challenges to Safeguarding Human Rights and the Promotion of Democracy in Cambodia

 Regarding the challenges and threats to safeguarding human rights and the promotion of democracy, the author of this paper believes the following key issues are important:

1. There are still human rights violations in Cambodia. A number of people continue to experience threats, intimidation and fear. At the same time, there have been a number of cases that involved murders and violence. All of these issues reflected the impacts of protracted conflict, authoritarian rule, feudalism and colonialism over a long period of time. This needs to be improved.

2. The timeframe for the development of grassroots democracy has been too short to really have a serious impact. In general, the people’s understanding of the importance
of democracy in the rural areas is still limited. More people—especially women—need to be more involved and participated in the process of development, democracy and human rights. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that the number of women in political positions should increase gradually, if not drastically, over the years.

3. The leadership mentality in Cambodia is still an issue and it needs to be more open, more responsible, more democratic, and more moralistic. Leaders need to be more responsive to the needs and interests of the people of Cambodia, especially the 85% of the population living in the countryside and those who are women. The leadership style, however, cannot continue to operate in feudalistic and traditional ways, without accountability, transparency, predictability and good governance. This reflects the leadership reality today in Cambodia, which emphasizes group or party interests over the collective good of the society as a whole.

4. The education and training programs on democracy and human rights have not yet been able to reach all people throughout the nation. Nor have they laid strong foundations in the hearts and minds of the people at large, especially the young generation and the people living in rural areas. Bottom-up approach should be emphasized. At the same time, the education and training programs should be geared toward women.

5. The government has not exhausted the potential and means of promoting and strengthening grassroots democracy and human rights in Cambodia. The national plan for the development and advancement of democracy is still unclear and lacks strategic planning. The only thing that Cambodia has at the moment is the constitution. Cambodia's constitution is specific about democracy and pluralism to which the government should prescribe. But, in reality, the implementation of any concrete plan is still limited.

6. The non-governmental organizations and civil society have done much work with regard to the promotion and education of human rights and democracy in Cambodia. But the government still has a limited role in this area, which should be strengthened in the coming years if the government is committed to serving the genuine needs and interests of the people.

7. So far, those individuals who have committed serious human rights violations have not been found. Nor have they been prosecuted. If this trend continues, it will be a major blow to the rule of law and social justice in this country. Therefore, it will have negative ramifications on the development of grassroots democracy in Cambodia.

Regarding the role of civil society and the government in strengthening the development of grassroots democracy, a number of ideas or measures expressed by the various Cambodians include many considerations or points of view below. These are how Cambodians expressed themselves.
a. One person stated that “Cambodian democracy needs to be developed according to the value, morality, tradition and culture of this country.” The person further said that “democracy cannot be taken or copied directly and totally from outside. We should do it in the Khmer way because Buddhism is already the foundation of democracy.” In this respect, according to this interviewee, “leaders must listen to and respect the will of the people.” Cambodia needs to “strengthen the state of law,” “promote moral rearmament,” “reform public administration,” “strengthen the system of checks and balances.”

b. Another person said “grassroots democracy in Cambodia can survive only if there is a rule of law or state of law.” By this, the person means “Cambodia must be ruled by law, not by men.” Cambodia needs to decentralize the authority and responsibility, as well as train leaders of the younger generation. One person stated that “to govern is to persuade.”

c. “Democracy in Cambodia cannot last long if it is not deeply rooted at the grassroots level,” one interviewee argued. He stated that “the people must be the real stakeholders of democracy.” “Democracy cannot survive if there is a real pattern of vote buying.”

d. Another interviewee said that in order for grassroots democracy to develop and strengthen “Cambodia needs to train as many leaders as possible, especially democratic leaders who have capabilities, knowledge and quality of leadership.”

e. Another person said that the role of media in promoting democracy is essential. In order for the media to play a critical role in promoting grassroots democracy, it is important to “improve the quality of production and dissemination of news,” to “promote free and independent media in the society,” to “ensure that journalists understand the importance of democracy, human rights and press freedom.”

f. One way to promote grassroots democracy in Cambodia is to “enhance the quality of leadership with morality and democratic values,” according to another interviewee. According to this person, “a democratic Cambodia needs a leader who understands the needs, the desires and the interests of the people.”

g. Another interviewee expressed her view that it is important “to enhance the effectiveness of the law and the legal system,” “to ensure the respect of human rights.

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7 Interview, Phnom Penh, 30 March 1999.
8 Ibid.
9 Interview, Phnom Penh, 30 March 1999.
10 Interview, Phnom Penh, 30 March 1999.
11 Interview, Phnom Penh, 30 March 1999.
12 Interview, Phnom Penh, 6 April 1999.
13 Interview, Phnom Penh, 6 April 1999.
by those in leadership positions,” “to strengthen democracy so that the elections can be organized freely and fairly in a regularized manner.”

h. To contribute to democracy building in Cambodia, one interviewee stated that it is essential “to strengthen the process of neutralization of the Cambodian armed forces so that it helps enhance social peace and non-violence,” “to educate and train the soldiers about the respect of human rights and the importance of democracy.”

i. A senior reporter of the largest circulation local newspaper said that, “Today, the rich people and the politicians have so much influence and pressures over reporters who are poor and lack conscience.” To him, this is “very dangerous for the development of grassroots democracy.” Cambodian journalists, according to him, “need to have better training, develop conscience, and should earn a little better.”

j. According to a Cambodian thinker, “the only way to check the abuse of power or the development of authoritarianism, there is a need to develop strong grassroots democracy in the rural areas. At the same time, the people should use democracy to keep leaders or politicians from doing crazy things when they are in power.”

k. Another person stated that “Cambodia needs to revitalize and rebuild Khmer democracy which Cambodia based on the philosophy of Buddhism or democracy by Cambodian elder statesmen since the prosperous, great Angkorean period.”

l. “To strengthen grassroots democracy is to resolve the leadership crisis in this country and to effectively implement the rule of law of the people,” another Cambodian analyst stated.

These are some of the contending views of the interviewees. There is no doubt that they expressed their frank and clear views about the need to strengthen and empower grassroots democracy in Cambodia.

IV. What Can Be Done to Help Safeguarding Human Rights and Strengthen Democratization in Cambodia

In this section of the paper, the author discusses the needs of local institutions, their strategies in implementing their works, and the role of international non-governmental organizations in helping the local NGOs to safeguarding human rights and promote democracy.
4.1 Needs of Local Institutions

Despite their achievements and track record thus far, Cambodian non-governmental organizations and civil society continue to face serious challenges. These challenges can be understood in the context of their needs.

One of the first needs of the local institutions is funding. Since it has been almost impossible to get any support from the government, private sector, and private contributions, most local NGOs have relied on external assistance. The dependency on external support calls into question the sustainability or survival of local NGOs and civil society in Cambodia. Thus, in order for the local NGOs to be strengthened funding support is essential.

Another important area of needs for the local NGOs is capacity building or human resources development. For the NGOs to contribute efficiently and effectively to the development of the country, they need to have capacity, knowledge, skills, experiences, and understanding of the people’s needs. Without sufficient human resources or capacity building, the performance of the local NGOs would surely be compromised.

The third area of needs for the local NGOs is strategy building. This means that they need to have clear objectives and goals, project planning and implementation, project evaluation, approaches to problem solving, as well as vision and direction. Strategy building is important for all NGOs to ensure the success of their programs and for their sustainability.

The fourth area of needs for the local NGOs is professionalism, transparency, accountability and credibility. The local NGOs cannot progress if they lack professionalism, responsibility and credibility in their work and projects. They will need to ensure that they have strong administrative capacity, including accounting and public relations not only with the government and the donors but also with the people and like-minded institutions in other countries.

Another important need for local institutions is expertise. All NGOs should develop their own areas of strength and expertise in which they can contribute to the people and society as a whole. Without recognizable expertise, it will continue to be a challenge for the NGOs to compete for assistance in a time of increasingly scarce funds and the increasing demands of assistance worldwide.

The sixth area of needs is networking and communication. Today the world is a globalized or regionalized networking world that requires more partnerships and greater cooperation. The leaders and representatives of the civil society are required to have more contacts, make new friends and forge new relationships. This means that communication is the key to unlocking vast opportunities. Local NGOs need to adapt to these changing realities and framework.
In order to reach more people and build a track record of the work of each organization, it is essential to publish work from time to time. The need to publish should be a priority for any local NGO. At the same time, it helps people better remember the work of an institution. After all, this is part of dissemination of information or information sharing.

Another area of needs for the local NGOs is the development of leadership and management skills. The success of a local institution may depend on the ability of its leader and the ways she/he manages the organization.

The ninth area of needs for the local NGOs is to understand their roles in a rapidly changing society. In other words, what can they do to meaningfully contribute to the country and the people in a sustainable manner? The roles of NGOs are evolving constantly, and therefore they need to stay relevant to the society and the people if they are meant to be permanent and sustainable.

Finally, it is important that the NGOs understand that they need to be impartial, neutral, non-biased and independent in their work. They need to be committed to serve the people or the real common interests, not themselves nor political parties.

**Strategies of the Local Institutions**

In order for the local NGOs to continue to be relevant and useful to the society, they need to come up with timely and practical strategies to respond to increasing workloads, the demands of public services, and decreases in funding support.

1. The local NGOs and civil society need to strengthen institutional capacity to ensure that they can perform at a higher level. This means that they should continue to give staff training and development on a continuing basis.

2. They need to mobilize local expertise, experience, information, accessibility, knowledge, and “best practices.” These are important strengths, and thus any local institution that can mobilize all of these factors is in a position to make significant contributions to Cambodia’s development and to make its own institution relevant to the real needs of the people.

3. They need to cooperate more with other institutions and organizations either in the country, in the region or in the world. Cooperation and networking are important strategies for the survival of any institution. In this context, it is essential to develop multiple channels of cooperation, access and partnership with the government, the donors and other institutions.

4. Promoting people’s ideas, desires and needs should be another critical strategy. Working directly with the people will provide credibility and strength to any institution.
5. From time to time, one should conduct forums or meetings to ensure that the topics of significant interest and benefit to the people or the policymakers are openly discussed. Public forums are an effective way to reach more people and institutions. At the same time, forums or meetings are important tools for dissemination of information to the people.

6. Working strategies should be reviewed on at least a yearly basis to ensure their effectiveness and positive impact. Working strategies cannot remain static or unchanged for a period of time. In fact, they need to adapt to the changing needs and interests of the society.

7. Another important strategy is to learn from others’ experiences, understandings, outlooks, lessons and approaches to problem-solving. No one truly has a monopoly of wisdom, including the government.

**What Role Can International Non-Governmental Organizations Play?**

Certainly, there are a number of ways in which the international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) can help the local NGOs in Cambodia. To strengthen the roles of local NGOs, the INGOs should consider providing some or all of the support listed below.

First, funding or shared funding should be provided to the local NGOs on a project basis. Depending on the type and duration of project, the INGOs should be in a position to assist the local NGOs with either partial or full overhead cost recovery. Sometimes the local NGOs do not have other funding support. Therefore, they may have to rely entirely on the projects that they are implementing. To rely entirely on one donor for their projects, the NGOs run the risk of being overly dependent on one source of funding. Therefore, the local NGOs should attempt to diversify their funding support.

Second, another role the international NGOs can play is to provide technical support in the form of skill training or capacity building. According to the interviews of the CICP research team, most of the local NGOs lack capacity and skills.

In addition to these needs, the local NGOs may request assistance in the form of office equipment. Without sufficient equipment, local NGOs’ work performances are constrained. It is also important to provide some assistance to help with the maintenance of the equipment or the working office.

Fourth, newly established local NGOs usually lack experience. In this respect, they may need the international NGOs to share their experience and understanding of the key issues in development. All local NGOs do not have the same level of knowledge, experience, and understanding of key issues in society.

Fifth, another important area in which the international NGOs can contribute to the local NGOs is to help with networking and building new contacts either in the country or in the
region and beyond. Networking can unlock a strategic window of opportunity for local NGOs for more contacts, more exposure, more information, and more sources of support.

Sixth, the international NGOs could also provide time, commitment and moral support to local NGOs. The international NGOs can encourage the local NGOs to be more proactive, more strategic, and more cooperative, not only among themselves but also between themselves and other institutions such as the donors, the international NGOs, the government, and so forth.

Seventh, local NGOs may face constraints related to either the government or local authorities. In some circumstances, international NGOs may be in a better position than the local ones to deal with such issues. In this context, the international NGOs can help facilitate the local NGOs’ relations with the government and local authorities.

Finally, the international NGOs can play a strategic role by evaluating or auditing the work of the local NGOs to ensure their high quality performance, transparency and accountability. In doing so, the international NGOs may help to strengthen the local NGOs with more credibility.

In addition to these visions and plans, what can Cambodian civil society do to play a constructive role in the development of grassroots democracy at present and in the future?

First, the people are tired of war and conflict, violence and destruction, human rights violations and intimidation, revolution and genocide. Democracy has entered the hearts and minds of the people. The role of the civil society is to help the people recover from these past traumas and change their mindsets to embrace democratic culture, values and ideas, as well as non-violence, pragmatism, and moral rearmament.

Second, wherever there are human right violations, fear and intimidation, the people lose trust and confidence in those who are the cause of this abuse. One role of the Cambodian civil society is to comfort and support the people.

Third, the strategic role of the Cambodian civil society is to make sure that not only everyone understands the importance of democracy and the value of human rights but also that they respect them.

Fourth, it is important that the local NGOs understand that their role could not be achieved without close cooperation with the local authority, partnership with the government, and collaboration with the donors. The Cambodian civil society needs to work closely with everyone.

Finally, for the NGOs to play strategic roles in promoting democracy and human rights they need to have well-calculated plans and implementation strategies.
Conclusions

In conclusion, there are several important points that this paper can make regarding safeguarding human rights and promoting democracy in Cambodia.

1. Cambodia needs better human rights and democracy: To some extent, democracy has reached the consciousness, hearts and minds of the Cambodian people. The suffering of the Cambodian people in more than two decades have made them much stronger and more willing to accept and believe in democracy because they know what life was like under the non-democratic regimes. Therefore, the more people of this country suffer from a long period of abuses, human rights violations, and oppression, the more they want democracy, especially grassroots democracy. The people of Cambodia today cannot live without democracy because it has now become a part of their life. To them, there is no substitute for democracy.

2. Timeframe: As a nation, Cambodia has opened up only in the last ten years. Even then, one may argue that Cambodia's democracy didn't really start until the arrival of the United Nations peacekeeping forces. The May 1993 elections could then be considered the starting date of Cambodia's serious journey to the road of democracy. Others used to argue that it took the United States more than 200 years to master democracy, and there is no way that Cambodia could do it in a short period of time. Cambodia certainly may need more time to ensure that its grassroots democracy is properly developed rather than half-baked. While there seems to be a political commitment on the part of the government to give greater effort and attention to the development of grassroots democracy, at the end of the day it will be mainly up to the civil society and the people to ensure that the development process of grassroots democracy is irreversible and that it will continue to make gradual progress. In this regard, more training and education on various aspects and dimensions of human rights and democracy should be continued more regularly, more frequently in the coming years. The emphasis should be placed on the inclusion of more women and youth. The participation of more women is critically important to the development of grassroots democracy in Cambodia.

3. Cambodian style of democracy: Based on the interviews, most people whom the research team interviewed seemed to agree that the Cambodian people need a style of democracy which should be based on Cambodian culture, history, tradition and philosophy. This means that Cambodian democracy could not be imported rightly from outside. Certainly, they argued that Cambodia could learn from many important lessons of the development of democracy in other countries, especially those countries that have a long tradition and history of democracy, especially strong democracy.

4. Partnership in grassroots democracy: In order for the development of grassroots democracy to be more effective, the government, national assembly, civil society and the people should work together in a meaningful partnership as expressed in vision one (V1) of the chart attached in the appendices. To be sure, this requires greater cooperation and the inclusion of people's participation (especially women) in the various debates and discussions as well as actual work in the society. For the survival as well as for the
advancement of grassroots democracy in Cambodia, it is essential that all the stakeholders, especially those who are in positions of responsibility, should think more strategically, more democratically, and more in the context of national interests and the needs of the people. The interests and the needs of the people should be at the top of the agenda of the government, the national assembly and civil society.

5. Cambodia's visions for a caring, democratic society: Ultimately, every Cambodian wants to have a caring, democratic society. The often-asked question is how to get there. The challenge is that while Cambodia tries to embrace democratic cultures, values and thinking it must maintain peace, stability, public order and security. A caring, democratic society, which every Cambodian wants to have, is a society that promotes the collective good, social justice, due process of law, and equity. For Cambodia, this vision is noble but it is not impossible if we can change our mindsets, attitudes and thinking. It is important that we get out of the historical coma, which has been preventing Cambodia from realizing its potentials of developing a free, democratic society. Of course, it takes time. We should have a Cambodia Vision 2020, which can guide us strategically into the future. In a caring, democratic society, the voice of women should be heard louder and more frequently. The participation of women in the political life should be further promoted. In other words, more women should be in the leadership position in the national assembly, in the senate, in the government, and in the civil society.

6. The role of education and human resources development: One of the most critical factors in promoting and developing grassroots democracy in Cambodia is the role of education and human resources development. Every interviewee of the study expressed his/her concern about either the lack of education or the need for more human resources development. In other words, for Cambodia to move ahead, education and human resources development should be the number one priority. Investment in the people of this country is one of the most important ways to contribute to grassroots democracy in Cambodia. Cambodia needs to reduce the number of people who are illiterate (especially women) and at the same time promote skills and vocational training as well as the overall education.

7. The role of international assistance: Cambodia has been fortunate for the kind of international support and assistance that it has been receiving over the past ten years or so. But given the degree and the duration of destruction experienced by this country, Cambodia no doubt continues to need more international support. Rebuilding the long fractured communities in Cambodia will take time, effort, commitment and assistance. Certainly, international assistance could come in various forms, ranging from budget to technical assistance to materials to sharing of experiences and understanding. Therefore, the continuing of international assistance, especially in the areas of human rights and grassroots democracy, is imperative.

8. Speed for the development of grassroots democracy: The process of development of grassroots democracy in Cambodia needs to be gradual and should be based on the political environment, improvement in human resources, economic development, poverty alleviation, and the development of civil society. While most of the actors and institutions
in Cambodia may find their work in the promotion and development of grassroots democracy to have some shared goals and visions, the approaches and the speed that they may wish to adopt may be different. But what is important is that the government and civil society should open up the development of grassroots democracy to include new actors and new institutions so that they may also contribute to this process of building a more sustainable grassroots democracy. The important actors that will need to be given greater role in the development of grassroots democracy are women and youth because they constitute the largest groups of the entire population in the country.

While the government and the national assembly may work in their areas in promoting grassroots democracy, civil society should reach out more to the people throughout the countryside. At the same time, the government and the civil society should engage the younger generation and women, as well as the leaders, in study tours and in providing access to more sources of information, more education and training.