

Cambodia – 1993 – Constituent Assembly Election

My name is Michael Miley and I served from March 1992 to July 1993 as Deputy Chief electoral officer in the electoral component of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, known as ANTAK. The 1993 Cambodian election was undertaken pursuant to international agreements signed in Paris in late 1991, the purpose of which was to bring an end to conflict which had caused devastation in the country for over 20 years. And indeed, an end to broader conflict in Indochina, dating back in one form or another to the 1940s. The Paris agreements also proclaimed an ambition to bring democracy to Cambodia, and one element of that was the election of a Constituent assembly to write a new post conflict constitution. The election represented a key milestone for the people of the country for the United Nations and for the broader development of international electoral cooperation.

For the Cambodians, the most significant development was the return in their country to something approaching peace. The election, boycotted by the most notorious of the warring factions, the Khmer Rouge, ultimately led to the marginalization of that group. Which collapsed into internal conflict within a few years and ceased to be a significant force. The Paris peace process also enabled the Cold War. Sponsors of the various parties to the conflict to withdraw from proxy warfare. And ultimately made it possible for Cambodia to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN. The aspiration expressed in the Paris agreements that Cambodia would become a consolidated democracy was not, however, sustained, and by 1998 the country had essentially returned to a form of autocratic government.

For the United Nations, the Cambodian election was the single largest and most challenging electoral operation the organization had undertaken up to that time. Substantially exceeding the scale of EUNS role in supervising and controlling the Namibian independent selection of 1989, the Cambodian electoral operation saw for the first time large numbers of mission appointees from outside the UN system. Forming the backbone of the election administration, which the UN was required to establish.

Furthermore, individuals recruited through the UN Volunteer Programme played a vital role in delivering the election at the grassroots level. Both of these initiatives came to be replicated in numerous UN electoral missions. Thereafter. The Cambodian operation also provided one of the foundations for the expansion of the EUNS role in electoral activities throughout the 1990s and subsequently. Staff of the electoral component of UNTAC, many of whom had joined the operation with little or no electoral background, emerged at the end of the mission as a trained, experienced and enthusiastic group. Well suited to meeting the rising demand for such individuals as the wave of

democratization swept throughout the world. From 1993 onwards, UNTAC electoral veterans played leading roles in missions in South Africa, Mozambique, the Balkans and then the Middle East. A number of them are now recognized as among the most highly respected experts in the field of international electoral cooperation. The extent to which the Cambodian operation should be judged a success will undoubtedly continue to be debated by historians. It's certainly succeeded in bringing an end to a long standing conflict. But as an exercise in democratization, it proved to be unsustainable. One lesson to be drawn from this is that establishing a democracy requires the complementary development of appropriate institutions and a supportive political culture. Institutional design can be relatively straightforward, but changing a political culture is far more difficult, especially in the aftermath of the war when the long established mindset of the political players is likely to be decidedly anti democratic.