

Where your political belief may mean your life

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NESTLING amidst the lush rice fields, just 60km south of Phnom Penh, Kompong Speu gives a sense of quiet detachment away from the hubbub of the nearby capital — and the troubled countryside beyond.

Wooden and brick houses line the main street and old women make fires from timber brought down from the surrounding hills.

But Kompong Speu is also a hot spot for the elections in May, which has been touted as the greatest hope for the country's future. Along the main street, six political parties have already set up offices, and party members drive around town on motorcycles and bicycles trying to encourage voters to register at the local Untac electoral site. Untac is the acronym for United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia.

Inside the spartan offices, officials on tiny budgets are in the midst of their election campaigning. "People have survived many regimes," says an official of the Funcinpec party. "Now they want a party that can maintain peace and independence." (Funcinpec is the French acronym for United National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia.)

But the mood of hope brought about by the first democratically held elections in decades is tinged with fear, not only by the refusal of the Khmer Rouge to play ball but also because the existing government, the State of Cambodia (SOC), has inspired terror among the other political parties.

Members of the SOC, the Vietnamese-installed government, are said to be responsi-

ble for a number of attacks on other political parties and for threatening state employees who are enrolling in those parties.

Two months ago, in the village of Thpong, a two-hour drive from Kompong Speu, a teacher who was also a member of Funcinpec was killed, reportedly after refusing to give up his local party member card. Other public servants have been threatened with expulsion from their jobs, unless they enroll with the SOC's Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

In November alone, about 15 complaints were handed to Untac's Human Rights component in Kompong Speu. This early in the new year, more than 300 complaints have already been received by organisations across the country. Most concern allegations of harassment by the SOC.

At the Funcinpec headquarters, just a few hundred metres down the road from the Untac Human Rights office, Loom Sip Ha, chief officer for the province, claims that members have been repeatedly harassed.

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"We are afraid to travel from one village to the next because SOC people may harm us," he said.

The Funcinpec party, which has a budget of only US\$1,000 a month to cover rent and all expenses has complained to Untac but with little result.

At the Republic Democracy Khmer Party (Redek) headquarters, a spartan wooden building, the same story is heard. "People are intimidated by the SOC and Untac is afraid to get involved," confesses Sok Sien, a 55-year-old former technician in a textile factory who is now chief of the Redek office.

Redek, a liberal party led by an American-Cambodian, has recruited 1,112 members in the province since mid-November. While the party does not expect to win power outright, it hopes to gain seats in the national assembly.

Hanging like a cloud over all the political activity in the area is the Khmer Rouge, the Marxist guerilla group which was responsible for genocide in the mid-1980s. Its members still inhabit the hills to the north and south of the province and have refused to disarm.

Earlier this month, the Khmer Rouge reiterated its position that Untac should strengthen the role of the Supreme National Council, the commission made up of the four factions, and rid the country of Vietnamese soldiers.

In spite of repeated assurances from Untac and a lack of evidence of occupying troops, their views are widely shared by growing numbers of Cambodians who fear that their independence is at stake.