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Information and Public Relations of Parliaments: Case Studies of the Parliaments of the Republic of Korea, Australia and Sweden

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Researcher: **Mr. Nun Assachan
Ms. Ros Bandeth**

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1. Introduction

In democratic societies, parliaments are required to be transparent and accountable to their citizens. Parliaments need to share information about their work with the public and at the same time allow citizens to provide feedback. This helps strengthen mutual understanding and integration between parliament and the people.[1]

Information and public relations are often the means for parliaments to establish understanding and relationships with their citizens.[2] Each country has its own way of implementing public relations depending on their culture, economic system, level of development and political conditions.[3] The performance of parliaments is rated by the World e-Parliament Index. In 2016, the communications of the National Assembly and the Senate of Cambodia scored 32 points and 36 points on a 100 point scale, respectively.[4] This confirms that the Cambodian parliament is still struggles in the process of expanding public relations with citizens. Studying public relations procedures of other countries' parliaments may provide best practices for the Cambodian parliament.

This research paper reviews experiences from other countries, specifically the Republic of Korea, Australia, and Sweden to inform the Cambodian parliament about key lessons learned and how to improve its current and future work in communication and public relations. The research paper first reviews the general approach to information and public relations in parliaments; then common challenges with regard to implementing public relation in parliaments are discussed; and finally, an overview is given of best practices from case studies of the Republic of Korea, Australia, and Sweden with a focus on the roles and responsibilities of departments that are responsible for public relations and the tools they have used.

2. Approaches to Information and Public Relations of Parliaments

All types of organizations use public relations to show their professional activities to the public. Parliaments in particular have been taking new steps in addition to traditional ways of conducting public relations. Methods used by parliaments include publication of debates, reports, and information; public visits; communication with various media[5]; and outreach activities.

Public relations has expanded with the growth of information and communication technology (ICT); 74 per cent of parliaments of the Inter-Parliamentary Union find digital tools, including websites, email, and social media important and useful as they can be used to notify citizens about the process of legislation and policy-related matters and enable citizens to be more involved in the political arena.[6] In 2012, information disseminated with the help of ICT made up 89 per cent of parliamentary information and documents of the members of Inter-Parliament Union (IPU) available and accessible to the public. However, only 25 per cent of low-income countries have reported ICT was used in communication with young people.[6]

3. Challenges for Parliamentary Information and Public Relation

IPU members acknowledge the importance of sharing information and covering parliamentary activities.[7] Direct links between citizens and media have been highlighted to eliminate the gaps between citizens and their parliamentary representatives[7] However in some countries, public relation strategies of parliaments have not been implemented well.

The IPU has found that parliamentary information is not attractive for commercial TV channels. The business of TV channels is boosting viewer ratings by broadcasting things that are in popular demand, so parliaments are not of high interest for commercial TV channels. This makes it more difficult for parliaments to send messages to the public.[7]

An interesting example is TV broadcasting in Africa. Most South Africans are poor and live in rural areas where electricity is not supplied adequately and many cannot afford to buy a TV. Therefore, parliamentary activities cannot be distributed to people in remote areas through TV channels.[7]

In Africa (except South Africa) public relations have been hindered by several problems. First, the concept of 'Public relations' is not well understood, so organizations or individuals do not bear in mind in the importance of public relations. Second, there are few professionals who work in public relations as people care about income, not the prestige or enjoyment of their profession. Third, African countries have many different spoken languages, which makes it hard to share information. Fourth, technological know-how is still lacking in many for African countries. Finally, infrastructure is limited and has resulted in issues such as inaccessible roads.[8]

An IPU report in 2012 showed that parliaments of low-income countries do not have enough resources to keep up with the best practices of high-income countries. This weakness was reconfirmed four years later in 2016 by the IPU. Similarly, all parliaments, regardless of their financial means, need to deal with limited knowledge and capacity of staff and members.[6] The report also specified that issues such as adopting technology and lack of leadership and direction of parliaments need to be resolved systematically.[6]

4. Case study

4.1 The Republic of Korea

The Japanese occupation of South Korea finished with the end of World War II in 1945. The National Assembly of the Republic of Korea was established in 1948, consisting of 198 members and it adopted the Constitution which specified a unicameral parliament and presidential system. The Secretariat of the National Assembly has obligations for covering all parliamentary activities such as meetings, release of legislative bills, budget allocation, inspection of state administrations, dealing with public complaints, and assisting with legislative processes and activities. Furthermore, the Parliament has a Budget

Office, a Research Service and a library which provide services to both the parliament and the public.[9]

In order to raise the citizens' awareness and have their voice heard in parliament, the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea has established divisions to take responsibility for public relations. Below, the divisions that are responsible for public relations and their best practices are described.

4.1.1 Divisions and Tools for Public Relations

There are several divisions responsible for public relations, being including: Director General of Public Relations Planning Office, National Assembly TV, the Parliamentary Information Office, and the Information Services Bureau.[10] Within these divisions the following tools and methods are available:

- The Assembly has its own TV channel which is called the National Assembly Broadcasting Station (NATV). It provides real-time information on Parliament 24 hours a day. The station was established in 2004 based on non-partisan principles and provides live footage of Plenary Sessions, Committee meetings, and hearings. This TV channel also provides information on legislation and issues. NATV also enables citizens to watch TV online. [9]
- MPs can take advantage of the growth of smartphone and internet use through constituency outreach activities and citizen participation in legislation on these mediums.[11] For example, there are plans for a 'Legislative App' that will allow MPs to listen to public opinions that are submitted to the Parliament. This application is basically a voice recorder that can transmit citizens' voice to the Parliament. [12]
- In addition the Assembly has developed mobile applications and a mobile webpage (<http://m.na.go.kr>) which enable a variety of mobile communication services to access information. These applications include: National Assembly integrated application, an application for distributing parliamentary proceedings, and the Assemblymen Square application.[9]
- Managed by the National Assembly Visitor Center, visitors are provided with guidance and explanations in different Halls of the Parliament, including the Children's Education Hall. The website (www.assembly.go.kr) is used for visitor registration and information.[9]
- Finally, there are training programs on the legislative process and parliamentary system which are conducted for members of parliament, staff, educators, and citizens.[13]

4.1.2. Best Practices

From these examples, we can see the Parliament's efforts to strengthen public relations and public awareness. First, technology for the Parliament has been developed and upgraded well, especially with the establishment of mobile

applications which are used to keep citizens up-to-date with the activities of parliament. Second, the parliamentary TV channel with real-time reports transfers parliamentary information and activities to constituents. Third, the parliament is not a place for only MPs, but is open to the public as well; the public can visit the library and the parliament and receive guidance on these visits. Not only adults, but also children are made aware of the parliament and its activities in the Children's Education Hall.

4.2 Australia

The House of Representatives of Australia, one of the houses of Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, consists of 150 members and forms the Australian Government .[14] This parliament has a 3-year mandate and each election is held before the end of this period. The Australian Labor Party, the Liberal Party of Australia, and the National Party of Australia are the main parties in the House of Representatives. Additionally, there is an increasing number of smaller parties.[15]

In public relations, the term 'community awareness' is considered an activity to promote the parliament. It entails engaging and educating the community about the works and procedures of parliament. The amount of \$1.3 million was planned for 2015-16 for community awareness activities but only half a million was used. With this money, the House of Representative has produced tools for public relations and awareness.[16]

4.2.1 Divisions and Tools for Public Relations

The Department of Parliamentary Services and the Parliamentary Education Office are the main players in public relations. A few of the services regarding public relations done by the Department of Parliamentary Services include TV and radio broadcasting, telecommunications and maintaining the Parliamentary Library. For its part, the Parliamentary Education Office facilitates education programs about the parliament.[17] Below is an elaboration of the tools used in public relations:

- News and information on parliamentary work is delivered through email publications on a fortnightly basis.
- Social media platforms allow face-to-face seminars and attract an increasing number of participants.
- A few programs were established to work directly with students and the public. For example, "My First Speech Competition" is encouraged among youngsters. Furthermore, internships and exchange programs are also offered.
- Electronic media such as Twitter is used. The parliamentary account @AboutTheHouse has 37,000 followers. Social media offers real-time engagement with the media and the public. The parliament's Facebook page had 4,600 followers in 2015-16 and posts descriptive information on the House and its committees. The platform Instagram is another tool

used to distribute information about activities of the Joint Standing Committee with regard to electoral matters.

- The House's Youtube channel has 2,240 subscribers. The channel posts clips called 'Question time' every sitting day, which are very popular.
- The House provides seminars on four main topics: "About parliament", "About the budget", "About legislation" and "About committees". There were 5 seminars in 2015-16. Besides the topics mentioned, seminars on different topics are also organized in response to the needs of organizations. Positive feedback has been given through formal evaluations.
- Over 70- sitting days in 2015-16, 55,435 people visited the parliament on sitting days and occasions.
- The Parliamentary Education Office (PEO) aims to extend the range of outreach activities to every student. The PEO website (www.peo.gov.au) is very effective and well-known for delivering parliamentary education material and resources to teachers and students located around Australia. Per year, 90,000 students are involved in role-play programs. A program called "My first Speech Competition" asks students to play roles as newly elected parliament members. They need to write and make a three minutes video talking about issues to citizens or the Parliament. The winners will be allowed to make their presentations in front of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, other members, senators and guests.[16]
- Last but not least, the parliament has its own online TV channel called the ATH TV which provides a great deal of information regarding parliamentary proceedings. The videos can be shared through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and many other social media.[18]

4.2.2 Best Practices

From the points mentioned above, it seems that the Australian parliament has integrated a significant number of digital tools similar to, or even broader than, the Parliament of the Republic of Korea. The Parliament has different divisions working together to support public relations. The parliament also creates a number of events and activities to work directly with communities and youth. Moreover, what is remarkable about the Australian Parliament is that it seeks to build interest among the public from a young age. For example, it has a program called "My First Speech Competition" which provides opportunities to students to pretend as if they were a parliamentarian and deal with parliamentary issues.

4.3 Sweden

The Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) was established with its first election in 1921 when this country achieved full democratic representation. In 1971 a unicameral parliament was introduced with 350 members.[19] Now it consists of 349 seats, 8 parties, and 15 committees.[20] It has important obligations

such as making laws, passing the national budget, checking the government's work, working with EU, and dealing with the foreign policy.[21]

4.3.1 Divisions and Tools for Public Relations

Improving public awareness and participation are the objectives of the public relations work of the parliament. Therefore, the parliament has established divisions and tools for public relations. Those divisions are as follows:

- The IT division works on IT architecture and provides IT services.
- The communication division promotes openness and information distribution and organizes material that is shared with the public.
- The Department of Media, Communications and Digital Development is responsible for media matters, such as the parliament's websites: www.riksdagen.se and eu-upplysningen.se, the parliament's data, and public information provisions.
- The Department of Visits, Education and Events provides guidance and material necessary for visitors, especially for students and teachers
- The Riksdag Library has essential materials dealing with law, political sciences, parliamentary documents and is open to the public.[22]

Tools for communication are as follows:

- The Riksdag webcast service is used to live broadcast debates and events of the Parliament. Furthermore, broadcasting companies are allowed to be connected and broadcast the events of the Parliament.
- The Riksdag Information Service provides answers by telephone and email (riksdagsinformation@riksdagen.se).
- The 'Follow and Subscribe' department provides four basic types of subscriptions: 1/RSS is a computer program in which you can receive news of the parliament without going through the Parliament's website; 2/ Twitter (@Sverigesriksdag); 3/Riksdag's open data (riksdagsinformation@riksdagen.se); and 4/The development blog (comments and opinions can be submitted).
- Media services provide accredited reporters and photographers recognized by the parliament with special rooms where they can collect information and discuss with the Association for Journalists.[23]

4.3.2 Best Practices

Methods used for public relations of the Swedish parliament are not too different from the other two Parliaments. The Riksdag has a TV channel, a department for media and communication, an ICT division, a department of visits, and a library which work collaboratively to share information with the public. Interestingly, the Riksdag has focused on building good relations with outside media. There is an association for journalists in the parliament building, but reporters, photographers and journalists need to have

accreditation certified by the parliament. Reporters are provided with special rooms in which they can watch the meetings and discuss with the association.

5. Conclusion

In democratic societies, parliaments are considered an essential organ that represents citizens' concerns. This means that parliaments need to create methods that make communication between citizens and the parliament feasible. Public relations are an essential means for communication.

Through literature review, we can see that there is a variety of tools and methods used by parliaments for public relations and awareness, such as publication of debate reports, information dissemination, public visits, and relations with media, outreach activities, and usage of ICT. However, public relations development is constraint by several challenges pertaining to the business interests of broadcasting parliamentary information on TV, levels of understanding regarding the importance of public relations, lack of professionals in this field, having to deal with a variety of languages, lack of technological know-how, and lack leadership and direction of parliaments.

The case studies of the three parliaments showed that when public relations work well, citizens are informed about parliamentary activities, hence the relationship between parliament and citizens are open. The three Parliaments have access to TV channels which information, legislation, and issues are reported on in real-time. In parallel with technological advances, social media and a wide range of mobile applications have been put in place. The websites of the parliaments are comprehensive and integrated with links and important information. Most notably, the educational offices, libraries and departments dealing with visits enable the public to be more knowledgeable and familiar with their Parliaments.

With the best practices of the three Parliaments, there are important lessons to be taken into consideration. First, they have taken advantage of technology, especially ICTs. There are a number of digital tools such as mobile applications and the Parliaments' website which provide a great deal of information, communication, and connection between the parliaments and the public. Second, they are connected to TV channels of their own or via private channels and televise live activities of the parliaments. Last but not least, the Parliaments have integrated education programs for students to have access to, and learn about, the parliaments.

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