

How to promote Democracy in the ASEAN Region

The Cambodian Example

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1. Introduction and Summary

Cambodia is a useful example in some ways for the promotion of democracy in ASEAN; in other ways it is not. Over the first quarter of this century, Cambodia suffered greatly, perhaps more than virtually any country in the world. War, genocide, political oppression, and international isolation all contributed to one of the bloodiest, most turbulent periods that any country has ever endured.

Yet today, as Thomas Hammerburg, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Human Rights in Cambodia wrote in 1996: "Cambodian society has made truly remarkable progress since 1993. Within three years after the formation of the Government, Cambodia has become one of the freest countries in the region."

What is responsible for this remarkable transformation? The short answer is a great deal of effort, by Cambodians and by the international community. But I would like also to emphasize that the democracy that emerged in Cambodia is still very fragile. Many people are working to ensure its survival, but that is not an assured outcome. I will tell you about some of the obstacles, and some of the successes, in these efforts.

2. Historical Background

First, however, some historical background. From the time of Angkor Wat and even before, Cambodia was ruled mainly by succession of kings. After the great achievements of the Angkor period, when Cambodia ruled the region, Cambodia declined into a small, poor country dominated by foreign powers. Cambodia's leaders were often divided and fighting among themselves. The reign of Prince Sihanouk, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum from 1945 to 1970, is remembered as a golden age of peace and prosperity for many Khmers of the older generation. It was not perfect, but it was a paradise to the hell that followed. After the coup against Prince Sihanouk led by General Lon Nol, the Indochinese war started to rage control. Hundreds of thousand of refugees fled the countryside for the cities, which were slowly strangled by Khmer Rouge encirclement. Corruption escalated and the government became weaker and weaker until April 1975, it fell to the Khmer Rouge. Then the Khmer Rouge reign of terror began. Over one million Cambodians, at least one-sixth of the population, died of murder or starvation caused by the authorities. The invading Vietnamese army removed Pol Pot in 1979 but hardship continued as resistance forces fought the new Vietnamese-backed Cambodian government.

The night was long, but the dawn finally came. A peace settlement was hammered out in the Paris Peace Accords of October 23, 1991. These agreements provided not only for the cessation of the conflict but the establishment of a process to lead a new political system based on liberal multiparty democracy, reached through free and fair elections. UNTAC, the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia, provided over 10,000 persons to carry out the peace process and organize the elections. Cambodians voted in massive numbers (90 percent). A democratic constitution was drafted and a new government was formed. It continues to rule today in an unusual power-sharing structure with two Prime Ministers and various Ministers and Ministries shared between the major parties, pending new national elections by 1998. The creation of democracy was due, first, to the enormous international community commitment, and second, due to the strong determination of the Cambodian people themselves to have peace and a democratic system.

3. "To build a democracy, you need democrats": Cambodia's challenge for the future

Despite Cambodia's success story, I must still emphasize that democracy in this country is very fragile. Many of the structures of democracy have been created, or at least started. However, to build a democracy, you need democrats. This means people committed to following democratic principles and practices. And we still have too few. There are powerful factors in the culture and political tradition which work against democracy. For over 1,000 years Cambodia was almost always ruled by authoritarian leaders. The moral values and mutual respect which prevailed in former times were swept aside by 25 years of war. Many Cambodians unfortunately leaned to solve their problems with the gun. This is still true today.

4. One solution: Education for Democracy

Now, much that Cambodia learned in the school of violence must be relented in the school of democracy and human rights. To the Cambodian government's credit, it has given strong support to the efforts (including those of the CHIR) to make human rights and democratic education a part of every student's education at all primary and secondary grades. Many other training programs are being conducted, for judges, for military, for police and gendarmes, for provincial governors, NGOs etc. But it is not easy to change mental habits. We believe it will take a generation – 10 or 20 years – for a democratic culture to take deep root.

We have found that a useful method in educating for democracy is to use concepts and traditions that are familiar. There are important aspects of Cambodian beliefs that support human rights and democracy. The Theravada Buddhist tradition as practiced in Cambodia is rich in moral instruction, which follows human rights principles. There are also elements in Theravada Buddhism which support democracy, the way monks are democratically organized, for example. In local Cambodian customs, village affairs are usually regulated in a democratic way. So there are important strands in Cambodia's history and culture which can support democratic development. They are like the fine

patterns in an antique silk-weaving. They are there, but you need to look closely to see their full beauty.

An important question is whether Cambodia has the luxury of taking 20 years to implant democracy. Maybe, because of political errors, undemocratic conduct, or conflict between the ruling parties, democracy will fail long before then. This is our fear.

What are some measures to prevent such a tragedy? There are the standard things that pro-democracy and human rights groups do such as lobbying government for good policies and when necessary condemning mistakes and abuses. International donors can use aid as a lever to encourage positive government actions. The Government itself can do many things, most important it can decide on its top priorities in these areas and vigorously carry them out and monitor progress.

5. Education for leaders: World Leaders' Gatherings

I have one final suggestion. Top government leaders, like everybody else, may need education in democracy. They have learned by experience, but their experience is often non-democratic. Yet formal training is hardly possible for such people. They are too busy, and "training" for a Prime Minister or President may be beneath their dignity. After all, these are intelligent and capable people who have made their way to the very top of their profession.

One idea is study tours abroad, but for heads of governments, these are rarely possible because there is too much protocol and ceremony involved in foreign visits. What then to do? We suggest informal sessions where current top leaders can exchange views and learn from other, retired world leaders for a few days or a week. This would be the government equivalent of a corporation's "retreat", where the President's of corporations isolate themselves in a pleasant setting to discuss problems in an informal relaxed atmosphere. Former, not current, chiefs of state or of government are suggested as the hosts as they have the stature and experience to speak to current leaders on an equal basis. They also have more time than active leaders. Especially good participants would be former leaders who have successfully guided their countries through the tradition to democracy.

Some world leaders like former US President Jimmy Carter, travel the globe to solve crises. This is good, but it is even better to do this crisis prevention, by working with leaders before disaster threatens. This is what we are advocating here. It would be specifically worthwhile if a former leader established an ongoing, trusting relationship with one or more current leaders, and could act as a soundingboard, advisor, or just a sympathetic listener.

Another route to the top leaders is through the people. If the people understand democracy, that creates a demand that top leaders acknowledge and deal with. Leaders, at least in Cambodia, do respond to strong popular sentiments. For this reason, among others, we place a great importance on educating the grass-roots communities for democracy. This means NGOs, Buddhist monks who are very educated and influential in

our society, women's groups, village committees and others who can, in effect, lobby the government at all levels.

6. Conclusions: Educations for Cambodia, Education for ASEAN

In conclusion, I would like to say that Cambodia has come a long way in its struggle to achieve full democracy, but it is still a long way to go. Its success is not certain, in view of its bloody past and continuing political difficulties. A critical method of ensuring the long-term arrival of democracy in Cambodia is, in our view, universal in these subjects, formal and informal, from the primary grades on up. Getting to the grass-roots and covering key target groups like officials, military and police is very important. Culturally-sensitive education could be applied to any ASEAN country. To reach top leaders, we suggest study tours and especially "world leader gatherings", joining current and world leaders to exchange experience and learn those democratic good governance at the very top. Grassroots education will create a pro-democracy political climate which will encourage leaders to be responsive.

Using all these techniques, we believe Cambodia and other ASEAN countries can strengthen democracy and ensure its survival at home and throughout the region.