

**KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA**

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**JUDGE CAMBODIA BY STANDARDS OF DEMOCRACY**

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*This article is an adaptation of a keynote address Sam Rainsy delivered at the Community of Democracies Ministerial Meeting in Seoul on November 11, 2002.*

One hundred and forty nations came together in Seoul this month as the Community of Democracies -- not because of regional proximity, military alliance or wealth, but because of shared ideals. Although Cambodia was rightfully denied an invitation, I was honored to participate as a keynote speaker.

Despite some trappings of democracy, Cambodia's government is more akin to the regimes in Zimbabwe, Iraq and Kyrgyzstan. Its absence from the league table of democracies should be shocking, considering that Cambodia was the beneficiary of a \$2 billion United Nations peacekeeping mission and administration from 1991 to 1993 following the end of Vietnamese occupation. In the decade that followed the U.N. withdrawal, Cambodia received billions more in international assistance to rebuild and develop a stable democracy.

While financially generous, the world abandoned Cambodia politically in 1993 when the winners of the U.N.-organized elections were denied the reins of power. The U.N. authorities stood by as the ruling communists maintained effective control after a decisive electoral loss. In 1998, Hun Sen's former communists murdered hundreds of opposition activists and manipulated the second round of parliamentary elections. Success-starved U.N. observers went on to endorse them as "free and fair."

The time has now come for Cambodia to be held to international standards. The world can agree that Hun Sen is better than Pol Pot, and that Cambodia is more democratic than Burma. But these meager accomplishments are not cause for celebration. Cambodia must be measured against democratic neighbors like Thailand and the Philippines, and its leaders must be compared to nation builders, not genocidal killers.

These lessons from Cambodia must be understood and applied elsewhere. The former Soviet republics of Central Asia once held great promise, with a wealth of natural resources and skilled workers. This promise faded as today's tin-pot despots led their countries backsliding into authoritarianism, with the familiar tools of presidential power grabs, press crackdowns and assassinations.

Where communist ideologies once prevailed, such regimes now rely on money laundering and trafficking in humans, gems, arms and narcotics for the cash to keep their loyal armies equipped and to purchase electoral legitimacy. Continued international support for such criminal regimes in the form of generous aid packages, military assistance and multilateral loans only strengthens their ability to carry out these activities.

Cambodia is now Southeast Asia's premier transit point for drugs, trafficked women and children, and laundered money. Like other lawless lands, it may soon become a haven for terrorists in search of passports, bank accounts and training camps.

Many regimes now enjoy international legitimacy as a result of their willingness to line up against terrorism. This free ride is shortsighted because it shifts the burden of world stability onto starving and voiceless populations longing for freedom. Post-Soviet tyrants may be preferable to Stalin or Mullah Omar, but they are not democrats and are destroying the lives of their people.

The world's dictators have not just become cleverer in the ways that they can create a facsimile of elections and democracy. They have also become skilled in manipulating an all too-willing international community. From Saddam Hussein's referendum on his presidency in Iraq -- a propaganda triumph -- to cryptic claims of progress in the Burmese military junta's negotiations with Aung San Suu Kyi that brought in millions of dollars in Japanese aid, the world has willingly believed what the most undemocratic regimes put before them.

The way that the world community judges democratization must change to reflect a clear set of principles. Do not judge progress against colonial or genocidal atrocities of the past. Judge democracy by an international standard inclusive of free elections, civil liberties and the rule of law. It is wrong for governments to silence the media or intimidate, lock up and kill political opponents.

Fewer murders and fewer prisoners from one year, or one election, to the next is not an appropriate measure of democratic progress. Every day, governments make black-and-white choices to be democratic and pluralistic, or not to be. The world community of democracies should reward or sanction them accordingly.

As a first step, democratic nations must re-evaluate the impact of their bilateral and multilateral assistance. Donor governments, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund must demand simple choices from aid recipients to meet international standards of justice, democracy and good governance. Only by holding the worst regimes to account can the world truly help the people of nations like Cambodia out of misery into a future of democracy and prosperity. [End]