‘An all-time low’: Cambodia’s search for peace and democracy continues

Cambodia has undergone a shrinking of democratic space and human rights in recent years, with this gathering pace again with the arrest of Rong Chhun and other activists in recent months. This Democracy Day, CCHR’s Chak Sopheap marks the occasion by outlining where the Kingdom is going wrong.

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Supporters of Rong Chhun, the President of Cambodian Trade Union Confederation, hold placards during a protest at the Appeals Court in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 26 August. EPA-EFE/Kith Serey

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In September, the world celebrates International Day of Democracy and International Day of Peace on the 15th and the 21st respectively. While the first is meant to encourage governments to strengthen and consolidate democracy, the second is devoted to reinforcing the ideals of peace. Democracy and peace are...
mutually inclusive: one cannot genuinely be achieved without the other and both are crucial for a country to flourish and prosper.

In the eyes of many, the Kingdom of Cambodia enjoys peace. However, true peace must be felt and cannot simply be declared: beyond the absence of war, democracy, as well as strong institutions and respect for human rights, are key components of a peaceful state. This year, while celebrating these international days, we shall question whether either democracy or peace has been meaningfully achieved in Cambodia.

After decades of unrest and conflict, Cambodia received its first real shot at peace when the Paris Peace Agreements were signed in October 1991, offering a comprehensive political settlement aimed at putting an end to years of conflict. While some violations of the Agreements were deplored in the years following their signature, overall, the Agreements are largely perceived as succeeding in ending years of conflict in Cambodia, bringing about relative peace through the absence of war. Cambodian citizens are no longer living with the fear of being killed in conflict and unceremoniously buried in mass graves, and bombs are no longer heard shattering entire villages at a time.

Peace, however, must be understood more broadly than the absence of war. States that have left periods of conflict and war behind can only boast of having achieved what is known as “negative peace”. To reach a just and all-encompassing peace, measures and policies aimed at achieving “positive peace” must be worked on once war has ended. Social justice and equality, respect for human rights, as well as harmonious social relations and good governance, are all necessary to attain positive peace and create a favorable environment for human potential to thrive.

In the context of Cambodia, negative peace has undoubtedly been achieved, as evidenced by the stability the country has enjoyed and profited from for many years. However, in addition to putting an end to conflict, the Agreements also
sought to facilitate the Cambodian people’s move towards reconciliation and self-determination, for a just and democratic Cambodia to emerge, paving the road towards positive peace. The drafters of the Agreements therefore insisted on the inclusion of democratic values and required respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, all of which figure like golden threads throughout the Agreements.

Sadly, these words, then loaded with hopeful expectations and promises, seem to exist only on paper today, as the human rights and political situation in Cambodia faces an all-time low.

The Royal Government of Cambodia’s repeated and systemic attacks on democracy constitute perhaps the most severe obstacle to Cambodia achieving positive peace. Over the last few years, the RGC’s sustained crackdown on dissenting and opposing voices has generated worldwide criticism.

The preamble of the Constitution of Cambodia states that Cambodia shall be “an ‘Island of Peace’ based on a liberal multi-party democratic system”. Despite this democratic safeguard, recent developments have consolidated power to the ruling political party, leaving no room for legitimate opposition or constructive democratic debating. In 2017, following an amendment to the Law on Political Parties, the main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), was dissolved by the Supreme Court and the seats it had won in the 2017 local elections were reallocated to the ruling Cambodian People’s Party. Cambodia thus became a de facto one-party state, leaving local supporters disenfranchised and unrepresented, in what was called “the death of democracy” in Cambodia.

In a bid to weaken dissent and suppress freedoms, the RGC amended its national legal framework ahead of the 2018 national elections. The Constitution was amended, following a rushed, secretive and one-sided amendment process, to introduce new vaguely-worded restrictions on fundamental freedoms. Article 42 now permits the government to take action against Cambodian citizens who do not place the “national interest” first. A similar amendment was made specifically for political parties. The Cambodia Criminal Code was also amended in early 2018, adding the offense of “insulting the King” in a further blow to freedom of expression. In addition to the enactment of impeding legislation, the lead-up to the 2018 elections saw the freedom of the press severely restricted to prevent unfavorable reporting. These systematic actions have hindered political plurality, illustrated a disregard for democratic checks and balances, and discouraged any expressions of dissent, acting as a firm barrier to Cambodia achieving peace.

Since then, the systematic targeting of dissenting voices has shown no sign of abating, with intimidation tactics, judicial harassment, threats and violence
routinely inflicted upon former-political opposition members, activists, human rights defenders, and those critical of the government. The RGC’s intolerance of dissent has also taken the form of a severe curtailment of Khmer citizens’ fundamental freedoms.

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‘Freedom Park shall have been named Restricted Park so we all know that we could not peacefully assemble there.’ Photo: Chak Sopheap Twitter

Freedom of expression remains illusory, as critical voices have been arrested for sharing their views. For example, Mr. Rong Chhun, a prominent union leader and member of the Cambodia Watchdog Council, was arrested on 31 July for a Facebook post regarding the Cambodia – Vietnam border. During the protests that erupted following his arbitrary arrest, multiple youth activists were arrested, a move that not only violates their freedom of peaceful assembly but intimidates and deters activists and the public at large from exercising their freedoms.
Furthermore, over the last few weeks alone, many peaceful protests were met with interference and violence by heavy-handed authorities using unnecessary force, in brazen violation of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Notably, the majority of this state violence has been inflicted against women. This crackdown on fundamental freedoms paints a rather grim picture of the current human rights situation, and ultimately of the search for peace, in Cambodia.

Yet, in December 2019, the Prime Minister declared that maintaining peace and stability was paramount, ranking peace as more important than democracy and human rights. This perspective seems to portray a narrow understanding of what constitutes peace and a failure to recognise that peace and democracy are inextricably linked and mutually reinforce each other. Democracy cannot be overlooked in the name of peace and stability: true peace requires an enabling environment in which fundamental freedoms and democratic values are respected.

Considering the current lack of genuine, multi-party democracy and Cambodia’s increasingly worrying human rights situation, “peace” exists solely for some in the Kingdom – its benefits only reaped by the well-connected, the wealthy and the powerful, deepening the gap between the privileged few and the majority of the Cambodian population. Among others, this “peace” made it possible for tycoon-led development projects to proliferate, with no or little consideration for the devastating human and environmental impact they could have. This “peace” has allowed ruling elites to enjoy impunity for grave human rights violations, while ordinary citizens languish in prison on politically-motivated charges. This “peace” has further permitted the ruling party to amend and adopt laws, reinforcing and consolidating its power.

In January, all state institutions and schools were urged to promote the RGC’s “Thank you peace” slogan, aimed at reminding the Cambodian population how precious peace is. By focusing only on the country’s stability and the absence of widespread conflict, this simplistic slogan suggesting that peace has been achieved overlooks – either willfully or ignorantly – the realities on the ground. Severe social injustices, high-levels of corruption and a lack of political representation leading to the disenfranchisement of a huge portion of the Cambodian population continue to plague Cambodia and stand in the way of a truly peaceful state.

Peace cannot simply be declared; it only exists if and to the extent that it is felt by the population. The people of Cambodia’s appreciation of whether peace has been achieved or not is the only one that matters. A people-oriented approach,
rooted in democracy and respect for human rights, is therefore direly needed if true peace is ever to become a reality.

Until the government prioritises the well-being of all its citizens over the interests of a privileged few, peace will remain elusive and the government will continue to fall short of fulfilling the Agreements’ vision of a peaceful and democratic Cambodia.

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