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US Nominates New Ambassador to Cambodia After Two-Year Vacancy

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U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh. Picture taken on April 13, 2018. (CamboJA/ Pring Samrang)

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The White House on June 1 nominated Christopher Anderson from Wisconsin as U.S. ambassador to Cambodia, filling a post that has been vacant for two years, and drawing attention as a potential positive signal for bilateral relations.

The nomination has been submitted to the U.S. Senate for confirmation.

The ambassadorial post has been vacant since mid-2024 following the departure of former U.S. Ambassador Patrick Murphy. Since then, the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh has been led by senior diplomats.

Robert William Forden, who was first nominated for the position in June 2022 and renominated in January 2024 by Joe Biden administration, advanced through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee but was not confirmed before the 118th Congress adjourned in January 2025.

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Following Forden's unsuccessful nomination, Bridgette L. Walker served as Chargé d'Affaires ad interim in Phnom Penh from August 2024 until May 2026, overseeing embassy operations during the transition period.

A month after Walker's departure, the Trump administration officially nominated Christopher Anderson to serve as the next U.S. ambassador to Cambodia.

Anderson's nomination might signal a potential thaw in the U.S.-Cambodia relations. However, Asia-Pacific geopolitical analyst Seng Vanly cautioned that it should not be viewed as an immediate shift in Washington's strategic priorities but as part of a broader diplomatic "win-win" arrangement between Phnom Penh and Washington.

"The decision not to rush to fill the vacant ambassadorial post may have served as a political tool to convey a message to the government of Hun Manet before reestablishing full high-level diplomatic engagement," he told CamboJA News, adding that it reflected Washington's "dissatisfaction with Cambodia's domestic political situation and constrained democratic space".

Therefore, he said, the royal pardon granted to former opposition leader Kem Sokha could also be seen as part of a broader diplomatic understanding between Phnom Penh and Washington.

Kem Sokha was granted a royal pardon on May 25, which freed him from a 27-year prison sentence on treason charges in a long-running case. However, he remains barred from engaging in political activities.

Vanly added that the royal pardon provides the White House with a politically favorable opportunity to advance an ambassadorial nomination to the Senate without facing the same level of criticism from U.S. lawmakers and policymakers who prioritize human rights concerns.

"In diplomacy, major developments that occur simultaneously are rarely coincidental," he said. "More often, they reflect negotiations and political trade-offs that create space for both sides to reengage through formal diplomatic channels."

Additionally, Vanly said the U.S. is likely to continue closely monitoring issues of borders and sovereignty to maintain regional balance.

On human rights and freedoms, he remarked, "Washington would maintain its core principles, while adjusting its approach through closer and more strategic diplomatic channels".

The U.S. Embassy in Cambodia declined to provide further details on the nomination, saying that the selection and confirmation of U.S. ambassadors is a formal process handled by the White House and the U.S. Senate.

Chann Rotana, spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affair, did not immediately respond to CamboJA News.

Civil society organizations (CSOs), which have long received U.S. support in promoting freedom, human rights, and democracy, said the move could create a more favorable environment for their work.

Seng Sovathana, executive director of the Cambodian Human Rights Center (CCHR), said the upcoming commune elections in 2027 and national elections in 2028 are especially important. He added that the U.S. ambassador could play a role in observing human rights, democracy, and the electoral process.

Similarly, Am Sam Ath, operations director at Licadho, said the development would strengthen cooperation between Cambodia and the U.S. across diplomatic and other fields.

"It is hoped that the U.S. Senate will give confidence to Christopher Anderson, and that he will soon take up the position of U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia and have good cooperation with Cambodia in further strengthening democracy, human rights, and development," he added.

Update: *This story was updated at 7:50 p.m on June 2, following a clarification by the U.S Embassy in Phnom Penh regarding Christopher Anderson's background that was mistakenly attributed to another Christopher Anderson, a Cultural Attaché at the US Department of State. The shared name is coincidental, the embassy said.*

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