Questions over civil society support as Swedish Embassy to shutter doors in Cambodia

Late last year, the Swedish government announced it would be closing its embassy in Cambodia. A long-time promoter and defender of human rights in the Kingdom, the closure will be sorely felt among civil society groups say Sopheap Chak and Jan Axel Nordlander.

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On 26 November last year, the Government of Sweden announced it will close its embassy in Phnom Penh at the end of 2021.

By the time the local office is shuttered, the Swedish Government will have transferred decisions on development cooperation implementation to the Swedish embassy in Bangkok, tasking the Swedish Ambassador to Thailand with maintaining relations with Cambodia.

The announcement of the embassy closure sent shockwaves through Cambodian civil society. This closure will undoubtedly represent a significant loss for the
country, as the Swedish embassy has been a positive force for the promotion and protection of human rights and a strong ally for those battling the dwindling democratic landscape in Cambodia.

Considering the increasingly worrying human rights situation in Cambodia, the Government of Sweden should reconsider its decision to close its embassy at such a crucial time. At the very least, it should station a senior diplomatic official or Chargé d’affaires in Phnom Penh to monitor and report on the development of human rights and the realisation of democracy, while maintaining contact with and offering support to human rights defenders in Cambodia.

For years, the Swedish Embassy and its diplomats have championed democracy and the rule of law in Cambodia by actively monitoring human rights abuses, key trials, and prison conditions. Many in the country have benefitted from Sweden’s diplomatic presence as Sweden has been a key partner of civil society, supporting their advocacy efforts for the promotion and protection of human rights and the advancement of democracy.

The announcement that the Embassy will close its doors at the end of 2021 was therefore acutely felt by Cambodian civil society. It is feared that the closure of the embassy and the subsequent loss of Swedish influence on civil society and human rights in Cambodia could lead to increased insecurity for front line human rights defenders and civil society organisations, leaving them vulnerable to further violations of their fundamental freedoms and potentially exposed to greater danger.

The end solution should be not to give up on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law within Cambodia, but for Sweden to continue exerting its political and moral influence in hopes of a brighter future for this developing nation.

Sweden has a long history of diplomatic and humanitarian ties with Cambodia, dating back to 1961. Since 2010, the Swedish embassy has played a pivotal role in facilitating bilateral development strategies led by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

However, after a recent evaluation of its development efforts, the Government of Sweden chose to progressively phase out its bilateral development strategy with Cambodia and redirect these funds, as of July 2021, exclusively to local strategies that promote human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Although SIDA will continue its work in Cambodia, fully removing Swedish diplomatic presence from Phnom Penh could counteract Sweden’s new aid policy: While a budget for human rights is crucial, it is not enough alone to rise to the challenges experienced by organisations working in a repressive political environment.
The announcement of the Swedish embassy’s closure comes in the wake of serious and systemic human rights abuses. Fears over closed civic space, fundamental freedoms, and the future of democracy rippled across Cambodia after the Royal Government of Cambodia renewed a harsh crackdown on human rights defenders, youth activists, journalists, and political opposition supporters in 2020, in an attempt to stifle criticism and dissent.

This deteriorating political landscape is familiar to Cambodians, yet deeply troubling. Considering the current quelling and persecution of human rights defenders, journalists, opposition members and activists, the decision for the Swedish embassy to pull out of Cambodia with no contingency measures in place is a detrimental error.

Amidst the democratic crisis Cambodia finds itself in, it is paramount for Sweden to maintain its ties with and support Cambodian civil society. In the face of the adversity that dissenting voices endure in the Kingdom, it is crucial that diplomats and civil society rally together to continue working towards the full realisation of human rights, the bleak alternative being the further decline of democracy and fundamental, inalienable rights.

Regardless of whatever decision is made, Cambodian civil society should be able to maintain its partnership with and count on the support of its long-term ally. Democracy fails when stable partnerships are torn apart. The end solution should be not to give up on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law within Cambodia, but for Sweden to continue exerting its political and moral influence in hopes of a brighter future for this developing nation.

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