Dear Editor,

On a recent return trip to the Kingdom, former United States Ambassador to Cambodia Joseph Mussomeli stated that “every nation has interests it wants to advance and protect” in its foreign relations with other states. According to Mussomeli, while the interests of China in Cambodia are access to natural resources, those of the US and some European governments relate to democracy and justice and, in the case of the US, are “inextricably linked to the Cambodian government’s commitment and attitude to its own people”.

In a column published in The Phnom Penh Post on October 11 (“A tale of two eligible suitors vying to win Cambodia”), Roger Mitton examined Cambodia’s “envious position” as the object of the competing attentions of two economic suitors, China and the US. Mitton’s article details recent overtures by the respective superpowers to “woo” Cambodia by strengthening economic ties and, in the case of China, increasing political and military cooperation. Mitton states that by criticising the December 2009 repatriation by the Royal Government of Cambodia of Chinese Uighurs, the US shot itself in the foot and lost vital ground to China in the battle for Cambodian alignment. Mitton concludes his article by urging Cambodia to exploit its envious position “to the hilt”.

Mitton’s article is a timely one and raises important questions as to the fate of human rights and democracy in Cambodia. As China draws ever closer to Cambodia, the temptation for Western democratic governments may be to abandon their commitment to democracy and justice, and to the people of Cambodia in order to placate the government and to ensure influence in the Kingdom and the ASEAN region.

In a recent speech at the United Nations Summit on the Millennium Development Goals in New York, US President Barack Obama unveiled his government’s new Global Development Policy; a new approach to foreign aid that will measure development in lives improved rather than dollars spent, and which will do away with short-term projects that manage poverty and produce only dependency in exchange for long-term projects that yield real societal improvements. At the centre of this new approach will be broad-based economic growth based upon bilateral ties between the US and partner countries. These partner countries will be those that are not only capable of moving forward economically but those who also “promote good governance and democracy, the rule of law and equal administration of justice, transparent institutions with strong civil societies and respect for human rights”.

In the past decade – a period during which Cambodia has been the world’s seventh-fastest growing economy – the ruling Cambodian People’s Party has dismantled the fundamental pillars of democracy and moved the country towards a one-party system similar to those in China and Vietnam.

Since the last election in 2008, a crackdown on freedom of expression has silenced dissenting voices, while a corrupt and politically controlled judiciary has continued to facilitate large-scale transfer of land from poor and marginalised groups to the political and economic elite. As is evident from the finding in the Global Hunger Index, as reported in The Phnom Penh Post on
October 12 (“Hunger levels ‘alarming’, report finds”), that 26 percent of the country’s population is undernourished, while Cambodia’s economic growth has been impressive, it has not been shared.

According to President Obama, the new US approach to development on the basis of bilateral partnerships with countries that promote good governance and respect human rights is borne out of the fact that “over the long run, democracy and economic growth go hand in hand”. While the specter of China looms large in the East, Western democracies must avoid being drawn into a race to the bottom for influence in Cambodia. In 2009, some 70 percent of Cambodian exports went to the US or the European Union, providing the Cambodian economy with a long-term viability that Chinese largesse cannot. With this in mind, Western democracies must maintain a principled stance and ensure that continued trade with and aid to Cambodia is contingent on the well-being of democracy and justice and is “inextricably linked to the Cambodian government’s commitment and attitude to its own people”.

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