

# The Time Is Now for Cambodia

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COVID-19 has brought the world to its knees, crippling global supply chains, causing global economic recession, widening social and political divides and potentially pushing the world to the brink of a new Cold War. Cambodia, which was initially shielded from the pandemic, experienced a sudden surge in infections and deaths between March and August of 2021. This forced the government to implement strict lockdown causing initial public panic and doomsaying.

Government opponents and political pundits viewed government policies—from COVID-19 vaccine procurement to mandatory vaccination and strict quarantine—as violation of human rights. They claimed that inoculation of Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccines is an experimentation with Cambodian lives, and that the purchase of Chinese-made vaccines is an opportunity for rent seeking for government officials. After seeing success, many political pundits and government opponents attributed such success to random luck. Such negative views in fact overlooked the government’s systematic nationwide mobilization, planning, and implementation of policies to combat COVID-19 as the sources of its success. Cambodia’s apparent success led even David Hutt, a journalist and a staunch critic of the Cambodian government, to acknowledge the Cambodian government’s effective response to the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

Cambodia’s success in containing the spread of COVID-19 is indicative of its leaders’ wielding

political will to mobilize human and capital resources in times of crisis. Cambodia’s success in tackling COVID-19 also disproved critics’ claim that Cambodia had engaged in a lopsided relationship with China. Although Cambodia had to pay for much of the COVID-19 vaccines from China, it was the close Sino-Cambodian relations that permitted Cambodia to secure the vaccines in time and in large quantity.

What’s next for Cambodia? Experiences from the Global South reveal that many countries, even if they are able to mobilize resources to deal with episodic crisis, are less successful in maintaining such mobilization for sustained development. The resulting fate for those countries is falling into a poverty trap and even potentially a conflict trap. The underlying problems for many countries of the Global South include unfavorable international context, the lack of political will among top leadership, and weak bureaucracies. In cases where bureaucratic excellence exists, they are present in the form of islands of excellence surrounded by the seas of inefficiency.

Cambodia arguably is at the right intersection that can permit it to avoid the fate of many countries of the Global South. The international context is favorable. Cambodia is situated in the Asia Pacific region with rapid economic growth propelled by emerging economic powers such as China and established economies such as Japan and South Korea. Despite criticisms of China’s comprehensive

<sup>1</sup> David Hutt, “China Isn’t the Only Reason for Cambodia’s Vaccination Success,” *The Diplomat*, 4 November, 2021.

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engagement with Cambodia—a model that is different from Western models— China presents a promising wave that can propel Cambodia toward its target of becoming a middle-income country by 2030. Through government’s policies, public declarations, and concrete actions such as revenues-induced public finance reform and evidence-based decision making, Cambodian leadership has exercised the political will to lead Cambodia to its stated goal. However, challenges remain.

In 2018, Samdech Prime Minister Hun Sen stated at the National Institute of Education that “...the issuance of policies is critical; however, successful implementation of those policies require the presence of bureaucrats with loyalty and adequate capacity.” The increased government revenues and successful campaigns to contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate that bureaucratic excellence does exist in Cambodia. However, viewing within the context of Cambodia’s entire bureaucracy, bureaucratic excellence exists in varying islands but noticeably there are more and more islands of such excellence. Sustained economic growth requires that the government expand these pockets of excellence into a sea of efficiency so that it can meet what the Prime Minister yearns for, which is presence of bureaucrats with loyalty and adequate capacity.

The presence of loyal and competent bureaucrats is also the foundation of lasting legitimacy for the ruling party. One can make a convincing argument that Western democracy is not suitable for all countries because of their divergent histories, cultures, and levels of development. But one cannot shy away from the fact that people of all countries accord legitimacy for the most part to their government based on its performance. Studies reveal that similar to their peers in the region, when Cambodians view democracy, they view it in terms of its instrumental values rather than its intrinsic value. In other words, Cambodians judge their government for its ability and effectiveness in promoting economic development, providing public goods, curbing corruption, and maintaining socio-economic equality.<sup>2</sup>

In the final analysis, history has shown that crises did not always drown a country. Determined leadership with clear development objectives, a collective social awakening, and a sense of urgency did not only help a country overcome crises but transformed it into an economically stronger and socially more unified country. The COVID-19 pandemic could present an opportunity for such transformation. What is needed is a sense of collective urgency to capitalize on this opportunity and the time for Cambodia is now!

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<sup>2</sup> Alex Chang, Yun-han Chu, and Bridget Welsh, "Southeast Asia: Sources of Regime Support," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 150-164.