

Why is it so difficult for Cambodia to be a US Government ally?

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As the chair of ASEAN, Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia participated in the ASEAN-US Summit in the United States on May 12-13, 2022.

Consider the Prime Minister's schedule during his visit to the United States as the chair of ASEAN: in addition to meeting with US President Joe Biden and his ASEAN counterparts, he met with many of his supporters and lobbyists in the US.

Hun Sen hosted a dinner reception with his Cambodian supporters just a day before his official meeting with US President and ASEAN leaders to thank them for their unwavering support.

During the dinner reception, Hun Sen spoke about Cambodian foreign policy, the country's internal crisis, and the country's development under his leadership. His speech at the dinner with Cambodian-Americans was full of emotions about Cambodia and how he worked to ensure that Cambodian citizens lived in peace. He also encouraged Cambodians living abroad to take advantage of the opportunity to obtain a Cambodian identity card, which would allow them to purchase land in Cambodia if they wanted to spend their final years there.

His speech is excellent and inspiring. When it comes to Cambodia's foreign policy, he claims that the country is happy to have good relations with all countries in the world, and that Cambodia cannot pick a side between the US and China or any other country.

During his speech, he asked an intriguing question: why is it so difficult for me to simply be a friend of the US government?

Those who follow Cambodia's political situation and foreign policy may not find it difficult to comprehend the root causes of the problems between Cambodia and the United States.

When it comes to human rights in ASEAN, Cambodia continues to outperform its neighbors such as Vietnam and Thailand. The United States has pressed Cambodia to respect freedom of speech, expression, and democracy, as well as other basic human rights. That should be grateful for the US



Prime Minister Hun Sen and President Joe Biden shake hands during the first day of the ASEAN-US Summit on May 12, 2022. Facebook

government's kindness and support for Cambodian citizens.

In the same way, Vietnam and Thailand, which are Cambodia's neighbors and share a similar situation in terms of human rights, freedom of expression, and other democratic issues, have a strong relationship with the United States. What is the situation like? In the US system, it appears that each country is judged using two standards, which appears to be unfair to Cambodia. However, there is no such thing as fairness in the world, and each person must live with and accept the unfairness of life.

Singapore, a close ally of the United States, is also known for its poor human rights record, but it maintains a positive relationship with the United States. Cambodia should take lessons from those countries rather than asking for favors from the US government.

The Cambodian government should first look within its capacity and try to improve its situation, as there are many things that can be improved within the country, such as public service, trash management, order city or clean city, ability to expand products, how to improve capacity of sub-national level officials, and happy service for local people, among other things.

If the US judges Cambodia and

its ASEAN alliances solely on the basis of human rights, it is clear that the US is biased against Cambodia; however, if we consider economic exchange, human resource capacity, military power, and geopolitical benefits, the US is on the right track for their own sake. Cambodia still appears to be too far behind those ASEAN countries in many areas that the US may find beneficial, but we must remember that while those countries were enjoying peace and development, Cambodia was still in the midst of a war and crisis.

The human rights issue was not listed as a topic for the ASEAN-US Summit, implying that the US is more concerned with the benefits of ASEAN than with human rights or democracy.

Some of ASEAN countries believe that maintaining good relations with the US is critical because the US remains the world's most powerful country and has sufficient resources to compete with China or other invading countries.

The US is aware of the diversity of governance and political systems in Southeast Asia, and it is unlikely to preach at length about democratic or human rights values when there are other more pressing issues to discuss, such as the South China Sea, the Ukraine crisis, and the situation in Myanmar, Korean

Peninsular issue, and among others.

Although relations between Cambodia and the United States have fluctuated, it is important to note that the Cambodian Prime Minister has taken a strong initiative to improve relations between the two countries. The US Embassy in Cambodia is located in Cambodia's most attractive area, and it was signed by Prime Minister Hun Sen. The two countries' good memories and helping hands should be highlighted, particularly the US's support for Cambodia prior to its independence in 1953, and the US is one of only a few countries that established diplomatic ties with Cambodia in 1950, before Cambodia gained full independence from France.

Overall, democracy, good governance, human rights, and democracy are not the only main factors that the US may want to see in Cambodia and its alliances, but a strong economy, human resources, and useful geopolitical competition are also important factors that the US may value more highly, and Cambodia should work hard with a strong determination to improve its internal capacity before seeking favor from outsiders. ■

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