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History Weighs Heavily on Cambodia's Human Rights Struggle

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More than 30 years after the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia is still struggling to build a strong foundation for human rights.

The U.N. and other international partners have helped us begin dealing with Khmer Rouge impunity and create space to talk more openly about our history and our human rights.

Renewed interest in the region, showcased by U.S. President Barack Obama's recent visit, also holds tremendous opportunities for progress in these arenas. But we must be cognizant that history often stands in the way of our optimistic visions for the future.

Human rights and history are interconnected, because to have a conversation about one inevitably requires an interpretation of the other. This is what has made the Khmer Rouge tribunal so valuable.

By opening a dialogue on some of the most sensitive and controversial parts of their history, Cambodians have been forced to confront basic questions on human rights, the rule of law, and the relationship between a government and its people.

The next step in this national conversation is to educate youth about genocide and the role of law in a just society.

For rights to be sustainable, they must be cultivated at the grassroots. That does not mean we must cease to engage with Cambodia's political and economic leaders. Building a stronger human rights foundation in Cambodia and the Asean region is a cornerstone to economic integration and participation within the global community.

Mr. Obama's visit to Cambodia was an important part of that process, as Cambodians look to the U.S. more than any other country as a beacon for leadership on human rights and democracy issues, as well as what can be achieved by a free and fair market system.

We also see Mr. Obama's visit to Burma as an important opportunity to help foster reconciliation and the rule of law in that country. Burma and Cambodia share many similarities in religion, culture, and political dynamics. One country's progress in democracy and human rights will help provide encouragement and offer a useful guide for improvement in the other.

In both cases, persuading countries to respect human rights from the top down is unlikely to be effective. We need bold new strategies—the Middle East and North Africa offer possible lessons.

The events and processes that fueled the Arab Spring show that diplomatic pressure on human rights and democratic reform often pales beside the effects of education and expanded access to information.

Governments evolve most sustainably when they do so at the request of an empowered citizenry and civil society actors. Educational initiatives and social dialogue, facilitated by the media, are key vehicles for fostering an informed public ready to encourage the rule of law.

In the stream of history, the impetus for societal change involves a multitude of actors. State-to-state meetings offer an opportunity to catalyze change, but sustainable evolution ultimately depends on building the local capacity to develop and defend basic rights.

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