

## [Walking the talk on Cambodia: Time for the international community to stop procrastinating](#)

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Next month will mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Paris Peace Agreements where, after decades of abuse and bloodshed in Cambodia, 19 signatory states and the international community forged a settlement for peace, stability and respect for human rights.

However, despite UN efforts and massive international assistance programmes in the last two decades, it is clear that the situation in Cambodia is deteriorating.

In two reports to be presented at the Council this week, UN experts raise concerns about shrinking democratic space in the country and a crackdown on the freedoms of assembly, association and expression. During the first week of the Council, on 14 September, a group of 39 states made a joint statement at the Council expressing concern regarding these issues.

Will the international community be able to stand by these statements and follow through on the commitments they made 25 years ago?

Things have been in steady decline for a while. In 2014 the government began massive crackdowns on protesters. Since then the government has passed a series of laws that severely restrict civil society and trade unions.

In April this year the government arrested and detained four civil society activists from the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) and a member of the National Election Committee on trumped up charges. In light of these events, a number of States raised concerns at the June 2016 session of the Human Rights Council.

However, this didn't seem to have much impact. In July 2016, a very prominent civil society leader Kem Ley was murdered in broad daylight casting a chilling effect of civil society.

Nearly simultaneous to the reading of the joint statement at the beginning of this session, outspoken member of the National Election Committee, Ny Chakrya, was convicted with spurious charges of criminal defamation (other charges remain pending).

Clearly international action in Geneva has not been strong enough to encourage the Cambodian government to mend its ways.

When the Council began its session earlier this month civil society organisations cited the deteriorating situation and called for a resolution on Cambodia. The regular resolution on Cambodia at the Council was bi-annualised recently. The last resolution was in 2015 which means the next one would be in 2017. This is

however just an informal administrative arrangement and not a hard and fast rule. States are expected to be able to react whenever the situation on the ground takes a turn for the worse.

Despite the decline on the ground it seems states do not yet have the appetite to break their informal administrative cycles. While the joint statement by 39 states at the beginning is an important and powerful expression of concern by states, it is still unclear how the Council or its mechanisms intend to exercise their mandate and arrest further disintegration in the human rights situation.

As 28<sup>th</sup> September and the scheduled debate at the Council approaches, much expectation remains focused on the interactive dialogue that will take place with the Special Rapporteur on Cambodia.

Will the Special Rapporteur be able to shine a light on serious clamp down on civic space during the dialogue? While her report to the Council acknowledges this, it has stopped short of going into details and identifying egregious incidents. Will states in their statements to the Council be able to clearly and unequivocally call for an improvement to the democratic space available in Cambodia?

With approaching elections, at the local level in 2017 and national level in 2018, things are expected to get worse in Cambodia. The political climate within the country makes it a tinderbox with fierce competition expected between the opposition and the ruling party.

The narrowing of civic space is a direct result of the current environment. Are institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council and the international community prepared to safeguard one of their long standing projects in democracy and reconstruction or will it be lost to the vagaries of geopolitics and political lethargy?

Cambodia was one of the first experiments in the post-cold war era and a significant one in the Asian region.

The 1991 Paris Peace Agreements came right at the end of the cold war regarding a country that suffered one of the worst crises of the war. The agreement implicitly acknowledged the responsibility of the international community towards the horrors of the cold war and represented a guarantee of democracy and human rights that a new world order claimed to pledge.

If the human rights situation in Cambodia descends into a state of turmoil it would signify an important failure for the international community and in particular the foreign policies of the 19 signatory states that include significant major and emerging powers: *Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Canada, the People's Republic of China, the French Republic, the Republic of India, the Republic of Indonesia, Japan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Singapore, the Kingdom of Thailand, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (succeeded by the Russian Federation), the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam.*

What happens in Cambodia will not stay in Cambodia. A failure in Cambodia will resonate strongly across the region. For example on Sri Lanka and Burma, which are under a stronger level of scrutiny under the Council's agenda, suggestions are rife on a softer level of scrutiny similar to the Cambodia model where technical cooperation and assistance is intended to bring about political change, democracy and human rights .

Outside the region the Council is engaged in a number of technical cooperation debates on human rights and democracy such as Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Burundi, Yemen and Somalia.

For the Council, a failure in Cambodia will seriously question the efficiency of its technical cooperation. The seriousness with which states act on Cambodia will be a litmus test for the contemporary political and human rights architecture.

This week and in the coming months not just Cambodians but also people in the rest of the world would be watching what states and bodies such as the Council do on Cambodia.

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