

**Opening Remark by H.E. Luy David, Secretary of State of the  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation  
At the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) Briefing Seminar  
“Quo vadis Cambodia?”**

Thursday, 28 June 2018 from 16:00 to 18:00  
at Asia Platform, Rue de la Loi 26, 10th Floor, B-1040 Brussels

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,

1. It is indeed my pleasure to join you today at this seminar conducted by the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS). I thank EIAS for inviting the Cambodian delegation to participate at this event. The theme of today’s seminar is “Quō vādis Cambodia”, which is a Latin phrase meaning "Where will Cambodia go?", if I understand it right. From the size of the participants, I can see a strong interest that the EU have about the future prospect of Cambodian democracy and, if I may add, its sustainable development. I am pleased to be able to share a few updates on the situation in my country as well as clarify some misperceptions.

*Ladies and gentlemen,*

2. The internet revolution has facilitated our lives and enhanced our economy and it has totally changed the way we communicate. We are living in the world of information abundance that can sometimes confuse our view and thoughts. Sometimes the narratives are shaped just like how the Cambridge Analytica had done with the 87 million people through their Facebook accounts, without us knowing it.

3. The availability of information is a double-edge sword. It sure can help us enhance better understanding but at the same time it can also ruin the trust and confidence when the flow of information is being channeled into a wrong direction and for a pre-set agenda. Cambodia is just the case in point on how it has been misinterpreted worldwide.

4. There are plenty of institutions with abundant of experts who are ready to issue international ranking, evaluation and reports. For Cambodia, familiar institutions always come with familiar sources of funding. The content of the report is “same same but different,” meaning

the information is almost the same. The difference is just the cover of the report and the name of the institution.

5. Let me give you a concrete example. A CNN story retraced the steps of women who were interviewed for a 2013 documentary. The report, initially given the online headline *The Cambodian girls sold for sex by their mothers*, but in fact it was featured ethnic Vietnamese women, and the headline was later changed. Media often try to stir sensation and unfortunately, the perception and image is extremely hard to change.

6. If we read the media, many European peoples would refrain themselves from visiting Cambodia for fear of stepping on landmines, facing robbery, insecurity, seeing pathetic and suppressed peoples, or receiving poor quality tourism services, you name it. But how many peoples have been surprised after they visited Cambodia?

7. Such narrative may sound like it has nothing to do with our today's topic. However, similar thing happens when we view democracy development from the perspective of European countries. The perception about Cambodia is extremely hard to change when Europe has been an advocacy playground for opposition leaders.

8. In Europe, I think the main reason for the misperception is the readiness to believe that Cambodia should be judged from the highest standard possible after the European nations have assisted -- some peoples also use the word "invested" in -- Cambodia's democracy and development for decades.

9. Some European peoples argue that their countries too had experienced destruction and war and that democracy is new for them but they still can do better than Cambodia. Such comparison, to me, does not reflect the reality of each society. Before WWII, European countries can already build tanks, ships, trains, all the necessary basics of their country's industry. State apparatus from healthcare, education, police, etc., are something that you can all take for granted.

10. But Cambodia, like other former colonies in Asia and Africa, we just received independence around 60 years ago and we didn't have any economic or industrial structure, no adequate public services and no human resources. Worse yet, these scarce human resources had been almost totally eliminated by the genocidal regime, leaving the whole society with bare hands, broken by a culture of violence, and socially fragmented from the competing ideologies and low level of education.

11. For those who knew Cambodia well, they understood clearly that, despite the UN-brokered election in 1993, it was only after 1998 that Cambodia was able to achieve its full peace, restore stability, reconcile amongst former warring factions, and re-unite its territorial integrity, if I may add, for the first time of our past 500-year history.

12. So, these are our achievements! This is our pride!

13. In my humble view, Cambodia can be proud of because: *Firstly*, among the many post-conflict nations we are probably the only nation that have enjoyed stable peace for the last two decades while the majority of other post-conflict nations assisted by the UN in the 1990s are still marred by wars.

14. Secondly, Cambodia is again, “probably”, the only country in the Southeast Asian region that can enjoy 3 elements altogether. Those elements are peace, fast economic growth and a certain degree of democracy, in accordance with Cambodia’s nation-building history.

15. Other countries in the region, either you have peace without democracy, or you have economic growth without democracy, or you have democracy without peace. It has to be clearly noted that Cambodia has all the three elements being developed concurrently although the speed of evolution of each element can be subjective and be open for discussion.

16. Let me now touch on the recent political development with regards to the dismantling of our opposition, the CNRP. I will put into a question instead! if we did not have adequate evidence to justify what we did, why would risk the criticisms and threats we face today? For us, the facts are established and the same facts would have been sanctioned the same way in many other democratic countries.

17. On a similar note, we feel that the government is a victim of injustice because we have never seen any public criticism or reprimand against a handful of politicians who styled themselves with insulting, defaming, populism, ultra-nationalism, resorting to appeals to class divide, racial hatred and xenophobia. These acts are strongly despised and condemned in Europe, complete silent from European states, NGOs and the UN Special Rapporteur. Is it fair for the Government? That is my question to you.

18. Moreover, we believe that we are victims of attacks based on preconceptions and excessive generalization. Speaking about preconceptions, if we take the example of some of our laws (on NGOs, on political parties), we are criticized for using legal provisions that are found in legislations of many Western countries.

19. About excessive generalizations, when expelling an NGO that for a year refused to meet the simple administrative requirements of the law, it becomes a massive attack on freedom of association. One ignores the thousands of law abiding NGOs who operate in Cambodia without a slight problem.

20. When just one privately owned media entity that is shut down because it refuses to pay its tax obligations, the event was characterized as a massive attack on press freedom. Again, one simply ignores the hundreds of newspapers and dozen of radio stations and TV channels, social media that are currently working in full freedom, even when they are strongly opposed to the government.

21. Let me be a bit more direct. We feel that Cambodia is a victim of geopolitical divide and action against us are taken under the guise of democracy and human rights. There is white elephant in the room that people are reluctant to talk about and I won’t also. China.

22. Concerning the possibility of sanction, we are of the view that the embargo will in no way advanced the political solution of the Cambodian tragedy. To suspend EBA means to punish us for protecting our institutions against non-democratic regime change and this will not change our resolve. But instead it will hurt the poor people and put a brake stop on our remarkable march toward “Sustainable Development”. And I stress the word Sustainable Development.

23. To suspend EBA for Cambodia is a bit hypocrite and a double standards, to say the least. Please forgive me on this point for not being very diplomatic. When such a sanction is not

imposed on other EBA countries where mass atrocity is happening, where there is no freedom of the press or social media, where the repression is a mode of government, it would be once again inflicting to the Cambodian people a terrible injustice. You can simply see for yourself the list of EBA beneficiaries and make comparison on their democracy and human rights track record and benchmark them against Cambodia.

24. Despite all the external pressures, I can reassure you that no one should doubt our goodwill in consolidating peaceful democracy and enhancing people's prosperity. We know that reforms are still needed to move towards a peaceful democracy. We also know that in other areas, improvements are needed.

25. The government is dedicated to build a working democracy, with our own pace, which still calls for an improvement in the general level of education, here I mean an education on democracy for all political actors, for the majority as well as for the opposition.

26. Let me recall you also that it was the government that proposed a "culture of dialogue" that the opposition rejected after one year of positive achievements. We need the EU cooperation in this field of political education. We know that the EU will not use the training on democracy to take side and interfere in home affairs.

27. The government asks the EU to help us moving forward, to work with us in delivering very concrete actions in the field of land rights, of labor rights, in the fight against child labor. The government is committed to adopt, with the support of the EU, a time-binding action plan to solve these long standing issues.

28. The government is committed to make the July 29 elections a democratic success. 19 parties will oppose the ruling party. It seems to have escaped some people that the ruling party is going to face real opponents, some of whom have increased their ranks with former dissolved party activists. One new party in competition is proud to announce that 60% of its 261 eligible candidates are former cadres in the dissolved CNRP. Other parties are led by long time opponents of the ruling party. If in the past they were not as successful as Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, perhaps it is because they refused to play the populist extreme nationalism and racism for electoral gains.

29. The government wants to express its trust in the fairness of EU observers. It wishes that the EU will send observers to monitor the electoral campaign, the vote, the counting of ballots and the allocation of seats. To refuse to come would be prejudging the plurality of the competition and the quality of the vote.

30. The EU has a long history of promoting peace and advancing human development in Cambodia. From emergency development aid to technical cooperation to border relief operations, repatriation of refugees, peacekeeping and elections after the 30-year civil war, through to post-conflict reconstruction and nation building, right up to the present-day commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). And for that Cambodia is so thankful and grateful.

31. I strongly believe that Cambodia has a very bright future as being the "beacon of democracy" in the region where many countries that you all know well are not so. In the long march towards sustainable development, Cambodia needs the EU's support in a holistic manner taking into consideration of Cambodia's social constraints and our national context.

32. I am ending my remark here and I am sure that our panelists will elaborate more on different perspectives and approaches that I may have missed. I sincerely hope that the seminar will stimulate more interest from all participants about Cambodia and will stir your desire to visit my country. To all of you, you are most welcome to visit Cambodia.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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