

# Lowell Stands for Democracy in Cambodia

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*by Marissa Dupont, Solidarity Lowell*

Lowell has the second-largest Cambodian population in the United States (after Long Beach, CA). But this population is not a monolith. There is a divide between those who stand behind the regime of Hun Sen (the Cambodian People’s Party, or CPP), and those who are fighting for democracy in Cambodia (the Cambodia National Rescue Party, or CNRP).

At the City Council meeting earlier this week, our ceremonial mayor, Sokhary Chau, submitted two motions to the Council, bundled as one, to establish Sister-City agreements between Lowell and the cities of Phnom Penh and Battambang in Cambodia. Chau is viewed by many in Lowell’s Cambodian population as overly sympathetic toward the CPP and the Cambodian regime despite its repeated human rights abuses, and such Sister City agreements would be a boon to the regime’s public relations efforts.

The excitement began as soon as a Councilor requested to have this motion moved up in the agenda. Immediately, Councilor Paul Ratha Yem, who was listed as one of the members who submitted the motion, announced that he was rescinding his support. He stated that he had been unaware of the message that supporting this would send, and that after speaking with many community members had decided that this was the wrong decision.

This motion brought out many important members of the Cambodian community in America—including two former members of the Cambodian Parliament, who traveled from Maryland and Rhode Island, respectively—as well as many supporters (both

Cambodian and otherwise). Every chair was filled. The mezzanine level was packed. Cheers erupted as soon as Yem finished speaking, and many waved signs bearing slogans in Khmer.



After the applause died down, Mayor Chau asked the Councilors if anyone else would second the motion. He was met with silence. He then announced that both motions failed and that we would be moving on in the agenda. But Councilor Vesna Nuon (who is also Cambodian) interrupted and politely asked that since all of these people showed up, that we should still hear what they had to say. (More applause.)

The first speaker, Bopha Peou, was very emotional and said that her father died in Cambodia, and she and her family fled here to escape the violence. She requested the motion never be brought up again as long as the dictatorial government was still in power. (Rousing applause)

Next was Susie Chhoun, a prominent member of the CNRP and member of the Lowell School Committee. The motions, she said, “are designed to camouflage a range of human rights abuses which take place under a veneer of normality in Cambodia.” She continued, “Phnom Penh is a city where critics of government have been killed notoriously in broad daylight with complete impunity.” She listed lakes that had been filled for property development, and “thousands of poor families left landless and homeless after violent and forced evictions.” She said that in the United States, “Cambodians are still being watched by the regime, including myself. Many are afraid to criticize the government, even in private conversations because they know that their families and business interests in Cambodia are at risk.” She was met with loud applause.



Rithy Uong spoke next. He is also a prominent member of the CNRP and made history as the first person of color elected to the Lowell City Council in 1999, where he served until 2005. In his speech, he reminded the Council of his past there, and listed a number of harrowing statistics about Cambodia. As he concluded, he said, “I myself am a survivor of the killing fields. I understand that I am here because I seek for the country that provides me freedom and democracy.” Then he looked to the balcony and loudly asked, “What do you want?” Many yelled in reply, “Democracy!”



Young up-and-coming politician Tara Hong followed Rithy. He is a board member of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association in Lowell, and challenged State Representative Rady Mom for his seat last year. “We have a government [in Cambodia] that arrests and silences people and dissolves political parties who speak up and push for change in the system.” He stated that if the motion had passed, we would be saying that what’s happening in Cambodia right now is okay, and went on to say that the UN, our State Senator Ed Kennedy, and State Representative Vanna Howard have all called for free and fair elections in Cambodia. “I am deeply, deeply disappointed to see our first Cambodian-American mayor would even bring this up.”



Solidarity Lowell member Dee Halzack was next at the podium. “As an American, I believe that any threat to democracy needs to be stood up against. One of the best ways we can stand up against it in other countries is to not pretend to be friends or act as if we’re friends with a repressive government.” The audience clapped. “I would also tell you that we should be leery of being friends with a country that is friends with China.”



Eng Chhai Eang, Vice President of the CNRP and a former member of Cambodian Parliament spoke next in Khmer; with Mu Sochua, Second Vice President of the CNRP and also a former member of Cambodian Parliament, interpreting into English. Eang stated that he was the Chair of the Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights in Cambodia. “I lost my seat because the Hun Sen government took it away.” He pointed out that Lowell City Councilors are elected by the people, and explained that in Cambodia, mayors are appointed by Hun Sen only to serve his interests. He said that were we to create a Sister City agreement with any city in Cambodia, we would be working for the Hun Sen regime.





In the middle of Eang’s speech, Mayor Chau interrupted him, accusing him of going over the five-minute time limit—even though he would not have if his speech were not being translated. up, despite the fact that were he not being translated, his speech would not have gone over the five minute limit. Eang kept speaking. Chau repeated what he said in Khmer. Eang kept speaking. Then Ron Peacetree (a Solidarity Lowell member) stood up in the back and yelled “He can have my time!” and Eang was able to finish his speech.

Solidarity Lowell member Joe Boyle followed Eang. “You would have been all over Cambodian state media, helping to disarm the Cambodian opposition,” Joe said while looking at Chau, “but, because of the actions taken by this body tonight, you won’t.”



Yun-Ju Choi, Executive Director of Coalition for a Better Acre, spoke next. She described traveling to Cambodia as part of a delegation with City Councilor Rita Mercier and then-City Councilor Rodney Elliot in 2015. She explained that back then she was new to Lowell and excited to learn about the culture here, but had no understanding of Cambodian politics. She went on to say that while in Cambodia she learned about what kind of government it has, and had a lot of regret for going on that trip.



Another up-and-coming young politician, Justin Ford, who ran for City Council two years ago, continued the speeches. He explained how his father and other family members came to America to escape the killing fields and create a better life for



themselves. “Mr. Mayor, ... You should know the significance behind that motion. Say no to dictators!” (Cheers)

I was next. My speech was short, so I’ll copy it here: “Hun Sen is a brutal dictator who is attempting to destroy democracy in Cambodia. Many of Lowell’s Cambodian citizens have relatives who still live there, who are trapped and unable to speak freely. This motion only legitimizes that dictatorship. We cannot forge a friendship with any cities in Cambodia while Hun Sen is in power. Solidarity Lowell stands with the CNRP in their fight for democracy in Cambodia.”



There were no more speakers from the community, so at this point they moved on to hear the thoughts of the City Council members.

Councilor Rita Mercier, the longest-serving member of the Council, kicked things off, with a defensive explanation of why she had gone to Cambodia with Yun-Ju Choi. She said she went to experience what her constituents feel, and see what they had experienced. She was not sorry for going because of all that she had learned. “We went to the refugee camps in Thailand, we went to Angkor Wat, we went to see a beautiful structure, wonder of the world...” she rambled. “I wouldn’t even want to tell you what I’ve been through, learning this,” she said of her trip, to actual victims of the killing fields. “The things that they did to the woman were just so atrocious that I think of it every now and then and it gives me the chills,” she said, to people who deal with these memories every day.

She went on to explain that she and the rest of the group from Lowell visited a prison where 13 women were unjustly locked up for wanting to keep their land when the government wanted to give it away. She said that when she returned to Lowell, she met with then-Congresswoman Nikki Tsongas, and Elliot met with Senator Elizabeth Warren, and they in turn met with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and in two weeks the women were released.

Councilor Kim Scott spoke up next and suggested that the Council review the criteria that we use to create Sister Cities.

Councilor Vesna Nuon was next to speak on this motion. He recognized the many Cambodians who had lost loved ones to the Khmer Rouge. “I am really almost in tears myself when Bopha Peou spoke. I know she had that feeling and most of the people in this room too. It’s been 40-something years and that doesn’t go away. ... Someday we will have a Sister City arrangement with Cambodia when they have a leader that do[es] respect human rights, free and fair elections, and the rule of law.”

Councilor Erik Gitschier followed with a speech straight out of middle school, starting with the dictionary definition of the word “democracy.” He thanked everyone who reached out to him and said that he learned a lot. He thanked the mayor for withdrawing the motion, but said, “I don’t know that we would have known any better had it not been put forward.” (Despite him having many Cambodians in his district.) “I learned a lot about Cambodia. Whether it’s true or not, I don’t have that background,” he added — a baffling statement.

Councilor Corey Robinson went next, pointing out that normally when a Sister City is proposed, the people of that heritage are proud and excited. But that was not the case in this situation, and this motion was not fair for the residents of the city.

Councilor Wayne Jenness said that unlike any other motion he’s seen, every message he heard about this was unanimous. He made the motion then to request that the Rules Subcommittee meet to create policies around the Sister Cities relationships going forward. A voice vote was then taken and the motion carried.

Finally, Mayor Chau himself announced that he’d like to say a few words. “When I made the Sister City motion, it was intended to be good for Battambang and Lowell, not for politics or the government.” He pointed out that we already have Sister City agreements with many other cities, including Liberia and Russia. He claimed that in creating those relationships, none of the Councilors had thought about the political parties of the government or country. At the end of his speech, he spoke about the many amazing qualities of Battambang in a way that seemed straight out of a tourist brochure. He ended with, “Battambang has many delicious foods and fruit.”

Boos echoed through the chamber.



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