

Vaccination Against COVID-19: Facts not Politics

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Just a little over a year, COVID-19 has destabilized the world, killing over 2.3 million people and affecting over 107 million individuals. The pandemic has also inflicted painful economic and social problems across the globe. On a positive front, scientists have developed vaccine against COVID-19 at an unprecedented speed. This is indeed a cause for celebration.

Although leading COVID-19 vaccines produced by companies such as AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Moderna, and SinoPharm have been under production, they are in short supply. The donation of 600,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine from China to Cambodia is a great first step in the fight against the pandemic for Cambodia. It is true that the COVID-19 vaccine produced by SinoPharm is awaiting the World Health Organization's approval. So are other vaccine candidates such as those manufactured by Moderna and AstraZeneca. However, these medicines have been authorized for public use in Western countries. The COVID-19 vaccine produced by SinoPharm has been proven safe and effective and many countries around the world have approved its use.

As a rising power, China of course utilizes the supply of its vaccine to enhance its soft-power, as it has done with its face mask diplomacy—a reference to China's medical assistance to foreign countries to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. My research has shown that China's assistance to Cambodia has contributed significantly to the success of the Cambodian government's fight against COVID-19 in the country. As a country with

a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China, Cambodia has been among the first recipients of China's vaccine assistance. In this critical time, the availability of the vaccine is crucial for Cambodia. Rich countries have preordered vaccine produced by AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Moderna; so, it will take time before these vaccines are available for developing countries like Cambodia. Even then, the cost will be high compared to the vaccine produced in China.

The critical point that I would like to stress here is the former CNRP leaders' irresponsible politicization of the Royal Government of Cambodia's vaccination program. On February 9, 2021, Radio Free Asia quoted a former CNRP leader who claimed that "the Cambodian government has the intention to use its citizens as experimental vaccine subjects to please China." Such a claim is baseless and absurd. Being a professor at an American university, I value freedom of speech. But freedom of speech needs to be responsible and based on reality. No one, with the exception of those who would desperately attempt to score political points at any cost—even to their own people—would believe that many governments around the world—from Cambodia to Turkey, from Egypt to Indonesia, and from Hungary to the United Arab Emirates—would approve the use of the COVID-19 vaccine produced by SinoPharm to intentionally hurt their own people in order to please China.

The world has witnessed the grave tragedy of politicians who have politicized COVID-19. In the United States, former President Donald Trump led

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the United States into its darkest days because of his politicization of COVID-19 prevention measures. He said wearing face masks and practicing social distancing were plots by his political opponents to take away freedoms from the American people. Falsification of scientific evidence for political gains have costed the United States over half a million lives and hundreds of billions of dollars.

The former CNRP's politicization of the COVID-19 vaccine reflects its xenophobia tactics. It has tried to capitalize on resentment that some Cambodians have toward Chinese investment, particularly in Sihanoukville that has caused some problems such as crime and public safety issues. The government of Cambodia has addressed these issues with notable success. Furthermore, despite

these issues, China's aid to, trade with, and investment in Cambodia has laid the foundation for Cambodia's economic take-off. The former CNRP's xenophobic tactics surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine could have severe consequences for Cambodia. The irresponsible false accusations about the potential danger of the COVID-19 vaccine produced by SinoPharm could undermine the government's vaccination program. It can make people become reluctant to receive the vaccination. If enough people refuse to be vaccinated, then the goal of creating herd immunity will fail. If that happens, the spread of COVID-19— which could have been prevented through vaccination program—could be intensified and the costs to Cambodian society could be severe.

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