

KEY POINTS ON THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF CAMBODIA BEFORE 1975

Donald Jameson, US Foreign Service Officer Retired

Legacy of the Past

Cambodia has a long tradition of authoritarian rule dating from the time of Angkor and before. In this system the king's power was in theory absolute. Everything in the kingdom was his property and the word for govern also meant to eat or consume. There was no corresponding notion, as in the West or some other Asian countries, of the king acting as the servant of the people. Absolute power flowed downward onto a powerless population

Khmer society under the monarchy was rigidly structured. The population was seen as a collection of subjects subservient to the king. It was divided between those who gave orders and those who paid homage. This was reinforced by the advent of Theravada Buddhism after the fall of Angkor. Buddhism held that those in power had their positions because of merit earned in previous lives.

There were no legal restraints on those in power nor peaceful methods for replacing them. When a king died struggles for succession were often fierce and the losers were routinely killed. This reflected a winner take all mentality where compromise was absent and the idea of a loyal opposition did not exist.

However, beneath the symbolic aura of absolute power the king's authority was limited by the rivalry of quasi independent regional officials, high ranking courtiers and members of the royal family. Thus there was constant competition for influence among the king's entourage, not unlike the behavior of Khmer politicians following

independence.

Under the French protectorate the king's authority was curtailed but the institution of royalty remained powerful and deferential attitudes in the population continued to be strong. Political activity was forbidden but little was done to diminish the hierarchical nature of Cambodian society or to introduce concepts such as accountability or respect for human rights. The Sihanouk Years

Because Cambodian kings accepted French protection there was little resistance to colonial rule. Cambodian nationalism was slow to develop. Important centers of budding nationalist sentiment in the late 1930s were the Lycée Sisowath, the Buddhist Institute and the newspaper Nagara Vatta. An intellectual from Kampuchea Krom named Son Ngoc Thanh, who worked at the Buddhist Institute, founded Nagara Vatta and became the first well known Cambodian nationalist leader.

The Japanese occupation of Indochina during World War II disrupted the continuity of French rule and set the scene for the development of a Cambodian independence movement when the war ended. The 1946 election of a Consultative Assembly was decisively won by the newly created Democratic Party, composed of intellectuals and government officials. It was also supported by much of the Buddhist clergy, which took an active role in resisting French rule, starting with the so-called "Umbrella Demonstration" in 1942 when they protested against the arrest of a well known monk for preaching against the French.

The Democrats and Son Ngoc Thanh favored the creation of a constitutional monarchy with power vested in a strong National Assembly and a largely symbolic king as chief of state. This placed them in sharp opposition to King Sihanouk and the French, who preferred a strong monarchy more reflective of Cambodia's historic pattern of governance. These opposing viewpoints remained an important undertone of Khmer politics for many years to come.

After an extended period of competition for power Sihanouk prevailed over the Democrats who were hampered by personal rivalries and disagreements among themselves. Sihanouk took charge of the situation by eliminating all political parties and creating a broad political movement called the Sangkum Reaser Nyium (Peoples Socialist Community) through which he ruled the country in a strongman manner until his downfall in 1970.

Parallel to these developments several groups of insurgents known as Khmer Issaraks battled for political influence. They were led by individuals with personal objectives and not well coordinated with each other. Some were little more than bandits who preyed on the rural population for their own ends, similar to outlaw groups which had plagued the countryside throughout Cambodian history. An Issarak leader named Dap Chhuon established himself along the Thai border and with Thai support created his own fiefdom in Siem Reap. He remained active, sometimes cooperating with Sihanouk and sometimes in opposition, until he was captured and killed by Lon Nol on Sihanouk's orders in 1959.

Another Issarak leader, Norodom Chanterangsei, established his own zone of operations in Kampong Speu where he remained active as a largely benign warlord until 1975. A well educated member of the royal family he invited diplomats to visit his enclave and enjoy sumptuous French meals during the Khmer Republic period. Groups like these contributed to the complex and confusing political map of Cambodia during the Sihanouk years and beyond.

Meanwhile, a small band of Cambodian Communists, which Sihanouk dubbed the Khmer Rouge, formed with help from the Vietnamese Communist party were driven underground by his repressive tactics and set up bases in remote areas near the Vietnam border. Their activities inside Cambodia were restrained by the Vietnamese because they did not want to disrupt relations with Sihanouk, who tolerated their use of Cambodian territory for bases. This created a resentment which exploded after the Khmer Rouge took power in

1975.

Until the mid 1960s Sihanouk's formula for tight control of politics in Cambodia was largely successful and the country enjoyed an environment of stability and economic growth which is now looked back on as a "golden age". But he became increasingly erratic as the decade wore on, nationalizing key sectors of the economy and breaking relations with the United States, which he believed had supported efforts by South Vietnam and Thailand to unseat him.

These moves angered the business community and the military, which had depended on US assistance for much of its operations. At the same time mismanagement of the newly appropriated state enterprises by the cronies Sihanouk had appointed to oversee them led to a slowdown in the economy and faltering revenues to finance the state budget. In a desperate attempt to raise money he authorized the opening of a casino in Phnom Penh causing many in the elite to bankrupt themselves at the gaming tables and contributing to a general sense of distress among the urban population.

At the same time, escalation of the Vietnam war led Sihanouk to make a secret alliance with North Vietnam allowing them to occupy large areas of Cambodian territory as base areas. He also permitted them to import supplies from China through the port of Sihanoukville. Given the strong hostility of most Cambodians toward the Vietnamese this introduced another irritant into domestic politics. To balance the Vietnamese Communist presence he reestablished relations with the US and acquiesced in American bombing of Vietnamese bases along the border.

Faced with these intractable problems Sihanouk increasingly withdrew from politics and indulged in frivolous pursuits such as his penchant for movie making and entertaining his entourage with musical evenings. In early 1970 he departed Phnom Penh for extended medical treatment in France, He left orders with the

government, now led by Lon Nol as Prime Minister, to organize demonstrations against the Vietnamese Communists to strengthen his hand in negotiations to limit their presence on Cambodian territory. But these got out of hand, leading to the sacking of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong embassies. Sihanouk's political foes seized on this groundswell of anti-Vietnamese sentiment to tag him with direct responsibility for the Vietnamese presence, spurring the National Assembly vote on March 18 to remove him from power.

Who was ultimately responsible for the decision to move against Sihanouk remains unclear but most likely a reluctant Lon Nol was persuaded to take action by his meddlesome younger brother Lon Non and Deputy Prime Minister Sisowath Sirik Matak, a long time Sihanouk rival. The "coup" was met with enthusiasm in urban areas where students, businessmen and the military had grown weary of Sihanouk's erratic behavior. His strong support in rural areas based on traditional reverence for his royal heritage led to several counter demonstrations in the provinces but the peasantry was powerless to take any countervailing actions. Their only recourse was to join the Khmer Rouge which many did when Sihanouk made common cause with the Communist rebels and called upon them to join the fight against the Lon Nol government.

There has been much speculation that the overthrow of Sihanouk was promoted by the US but there is no evidence to support this. Some suggest that there might have been contacts between the Lon Nol government and American officials in Vietnam who encouraged them to overthrow Sihanouk. Son Ngoc Thanh, whose Khmer Serei group operated from Vietnam and was trained by the US Special Forces for border security purposes, may have been an intermediary. Son Ngoc Thanh, Sihanouk's life long nemesis, was linked with the Lon Nol group and later served as prime minister in the Khmer Republic.

The Khmer Republic

With the climate of repression under Sihanouk suddenly lifted the free

for all political atmosphere of the early 1950s resumed. Son Ngoc Thanh and the former Democrats, who had been in exile or sidelined from political activity by Sihanouk, returned to the fray. Students and intellectuals welcomed the new atmosphere of freedom and were filled with hope and optimism that a new age of democracy had arrived. For the first time in nearly 20 years educated Cambodians were free to express their political opinions openly.

There was enthusiasm as well for Lon Nol's ultimatum that the Vietnamese Communists abandon their bases along the eastern border and withdraw from Cambodian territory. The Vietnamese rebuffed this demand and instead attacked deeper into Cambodia under cover of Sihanouk's call to arms against the Lon Nol government. In response thousands of young people in Phnom Penh volunteered to join the army to drive the hated Vietnamese enemy out of the country.

A carnival like atmosphere ensued as the new recruits rode to the front on busses and Coca Cola trucks, some wearing makeshift uniforms and armed with a variety of French, Russian, Chinese or American weapons. Most had received no more than a week of training and were no match for the battle hardened North Vietnamese troops they met on the battlefield.

The small, inexperienced and poorly equipped regular Cambodian army was equally unprepared to fight the Vietnamese forces and within several months most of Cambodia east of the Mekong had fallen into enemy hands. The US incursion into eastern Cambodia disrupted Vietnamese Communist actions but ultimately only drove them deeper into Cambodia. Several brigades of the US trained Khmer Serei forces from Vietnam were brought in to support the Cambodian army and helped to stabilize the situation. By the end of 1970 the battle lines had been drawn and remained generally fixed while ferocious battles continued along these axes of confrontation.

As the reality that the Vietnamese Communists would not be easily

expelled from Cambodian territory and the prospect of a long war set in the optimism that greeted the overthrow of Sihanouk faded and morale plummeted. An early 1971 surprise sapper attack on the Phnom Penh airport which destroyed much of the small Khmer Air Force demonstrated the vulnerability of the capital itself. A few weeks later Lon Nol suffered a stroke, further adding to the gloom.

In this atmosphere of uncertainty the divisive politics of earlier eras returned as factions backing Lon Nol, Siri Matak, Son Ngoc Thanh and In Tam vied for influence and power. A new ingredient was the antics of Lon Nol's younger brother Lon Non who maneuvered to protect Lon Nol's position and undercut that of Siri Matak while engaging in behind the scenes power plays with uncertain objectives other than to promote his own interests.

The various factions enlisted support from student activists leading to mass street demonstrations attacking the government and other actors. As the political situation deteriorated Lon Nol, partially recovered from his stroke, became increasingly dictatorial, alienating many of those who had originally supported his takeover of power. He stage managed the referendum to approve a new constitution. This was followed by rigged elections in which he won the newly created position of President. Later elections for a new National Assembly were boycotted by opponents with the result that all seats went to his Socio-Republican Party.

Meanwhile corruption ran rampant, especially within the armed forces, as officers sought to enrich themselves by padding troop rolls and pocketing the pay of "ghost" soldiers. They also sold gasoline, equipment and ammunition to the enemy. By early 1973 this was composed mostly of Khmer Rouge since the Vietnamese Communists had largely withdrawn following the ceasefire in Vietnam. The KR, who were a motley band of insurgents in 1970, had grown into a serious fighting force able to battle the Cambodian army on their own.

However, Lon Nol refused to accept this new reality, maintaining that his forces were engaged in a religious war to defend Khmer Buddhism against the heathen “thmil” of Buddhist lore. He also turned to astrologers and occult practices including the use of magic vests designed to make his soldiers bullet proof and the employment of incantations that multiplied the size of his forces to drive the enemy away. Underlying all this was his professed belief that what he called the Khmer Mon race was superior to others in battle and thus bound to win in conflict.

With this kind of leadership at the top, along with sagging morale among the troops and the population generally, the war effort went increasingly badly. While there were many instances of heroic bravery by common soldiers in battle, commanders were sometimes back in Phnom Penh enjoying the party scene while their troops faced the enemy at the front. Under these conditions the Khmer Rouge tightened the noose around the capital, finally chocking off the main supply route for US aid up the Mekong from Vietnam, leaving the city dependent for its life on the American airlift.

The KR advance was stalled somewhat by massive US B-52 bombing during the first half of 1973 but this was halted by Congress on August 15, virtually sealing the fate of the Khmer Republic. Journalists flocked to Phnom Penh to witness what they expected to be the fall of the Lon Nol regime but it managed to struggle on for another 1 1/2 years under increasingly desperate conditions as the enemy began random rocketing of the city from their positions on the outskirts. Most of the victims were civilians, helping to spread a climate of terror.

As conditions deteriorated the Khmer Republic leadership fell back on hopes that the US would somehow save the day for them. But with Congress unwilling to fund further assistance and the Cambodian army unable to hold off the Khmer Rouge advance on Phnom Penh there was no way to avoid final defeat. Last minute efforts to arrange some sort of truce with Sihanouk failed and the Khmer Rouge entered the city on April 17, 1975.