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Prince Norodom Sihanouk



# The Model of Absolute Monarchy in Cambodia 1953-1970

by

Weena Yong



Trinity College  
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

# Prince Sihanouk: The Model of Absolute Monarchy in Cambodia

By

Weena Yong

Advised by Michael Lestz

Janet Bauer

Zayde Gordon Antrim

A Thesis Submitted to the International Studies Program  
of Trinity College in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Bachelor of Arts Degree

© May 2013

For my parents,  
MiOk Mun and Yong Inn Hoe,  
My brothers,  
KeeSing Benjamin and KeeHup Arie,  
My sister,  
Lenna XingMei  
And to all my advisors and friends,  
Whom have inspired and supported me  
Every day.

# Abstract

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This thesis addresses Prince Sihanouk and the model of absolute monarchy in Cambodia during his 'golden era.' What is the legacy bequeathed to his country that emanated from his years as his country's autocratic leader (1954-1970)? What did he leave behind? My original hypothesis was that Sihanouk was a libertine and ruthless god-king who had immense pride for his country. He fought for his people and had strong good intentions. Instead, through research, I discovered that there are many good and bad facets of Sihanouk's past and the political practices that marked his era as Cambodia's supreme ruler. His legacy is mind-boggling in its complexity and contradictions. This study brings to the surface a stronger understanding of: 1) his attempt to consolidate support for his dictatorship by eliminating or side-line opponents; 2) his effort to transform Phnom Penh into a spectacular capital that would symbolize the new path he sought to blaze in contemporary Cambodian history; and 3) his unsuccessful effort to keep Cambodia out of the war in Vietnam. The tension between Sihanouk's attempt to forge a neutral path for Cambodia and his own desire to control the monarchy worked well. Fueled by this desire, Sihanouk lifted Cambodia up to stand on its own two feet. He gave a sense of hope to Cambodians, as well as modernized a small nation. Sihanouk's commitment to remaining neutral and the Cambodians immense loyalty to this Father-Prince, allowed Cambodia to build up so quickly in a short amount of time.

# Acknowledgements

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谢谢

감사합니다

អរគុណច្រើន

Thank you

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# Introduction

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Prince Norodom Sihanouk passed away on October 15, of last year due to a heart attack during his stay in China's capital, Beijing. He was 89 years old. His body was returned to his homeland on February 4 of this year, where it was taken to the Royal Palace for a week of official mourning. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians surrounded the capital for the royal cremation. After sunset that day, Sihanouk's son King Norodom Sihamoni and widow, Queen Mother Norodom Monineath, ignited the funeral pyre inside King Sihanouk's crematorium. It would mark the end of seven days of mourning. The \$1.2 million temple-like, 15-story-high crematorium was built next to the Royal Palace, just for this funeral, and was dismantled right after.<sup>1</sup> There has been an outpouring of grief for the late king, who since abdicated in favor of his son Sihamoni in 2004 spent much of his last years in China for medical treatment.

The question most frequently asked with Sihanouk's passing has been where does this leave the Cambodian monarchy? Well, we shall see. Presently though, the monarchy does not seem to be under threat. It is a largely symbolic institution that plays an extremely limited political role under the dictatorship of President Hun Sen. Indeed, the monarchy seems to have reverted into being the sort of legitimating agency it was under the French colonial system.

We may not be able to peer into the crystal ball and predict Cambodia's future, but what we can do is look back at the past. The more interesting question concerns Sihanouk's historical legacy. What is the legacy bequeathed to his country that emanated from his years as his country's autocratic leader (1954-1970)? What did he leave behind?

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis D. Gray, Associated Press, "Cambodia Mourns as 'King-father' Sihanouk Cremated," *Time: World*, February 4, 2013, assessed February 27, 2013, <http://world.time.com/2013/02/04/cambodia-mourns-as-king-father-sihanouk-cremated/>.

Sihanouk was the leader of a country that was a backwater under the L'Union d'Indochine. Events in Vietnam—as the Vietminh waged their independence war—were at the center of the regional and larger geopolitical stage after 1945. Sihanouk was attempting to revive an already discredited institution (the monarchy) to serve as the binding agent of an independent state after over nearly one hundred years of colonialism. Why was the monarchy discredited? Because it was perceived by many Cambodian's as an empty framework of rule propped up by the French as the extracted resources from Cambodia.

A Cambodian nationalist and political leader, Prince Sihanouk was born in 1922, and educated in France. It was approximately 71 years ago, when Prince Sihanouk's first coronation took place on Oct. 28, 1941 at the *Preah Thineang Dheva Vinnichay Mohai Moha Prasat* or "Throne Hall". I still remember the beauty of the 19<sup>th</sup> century palace Khmer style built by the French for Cambodia's monarchs after colonization began and the capital was moved to Phnom Penh (1866). Clearly, the palace was designed to remember a distant and intangible past. The smell of incense rushed through my nostrils as I entered the Royal Palace. Gold angel-like Apsara dance figures hang around the ceilings. Stupas (*chedei*), towering spires (*prang prasat*) and mural paintings, such as frescos of the Reamker were laid out all around the buildings. Inside, young monks in golden robes were chanting in unison. The palace was a piece of architecture designed to magnify the role of puppet Khmer monarchs within the Union of Indochina, but after independence it became more the seat of the absolutist government rule by Sihanouk.

This research study poses the question of what Sihanouk's historical legacy was. The central focus of this study is of Sihanouk's career after the colonial era, before the right-wing

military coup toppled Sihanouk in 1970. The bulk of my information for this essay is derived from Sihanouk's memoirs and articles, monographs and articles on Cambodia by specialists on this period, as well as a recent book by Cambodia's royal architect Vann Molyvann. Looking back at Sihanouk's legacy, despite mixed reactions (and his backing of the Khmer Rouge), how has he been important to Cambodian identity and heritage? So many people came to pay their last respects at his funeral; hence Sihanouk must have impacted their lives in some way.

## **Sihanouk before independence (1941-1953)**

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Sihanouk was only 18 years old, and the French believe that he would make an ideal nominal ruler; hence, they elevated him power after the death of maternal grandfather, King Sisowath Monivong in April 23, 1941 as Cambodia was administered by a Vichy admiral. In his review of the postwar years, Charles Meyer characterized Sihanouk as someone had a “youthful ardour” in his search for ways to apply a democratic system to his country, but also as someone who spent the “greatest part of his time to worthless activities and above all his affairs of the heart”.<sup>2</sup> Until independence Sihanouk was an ineffectual playboy royal. For long periods Sihanouk was content to turn his back on the world of politics and to find solace in women, sport and the cinema. The attraction of the last, dating as it did from early childhood, suggests a personality deeply attracted to idealized solutions, with right triumphing over wrong and the hero over the villain, and with everything ending happily. The real world, as well all know, was a much more complex, troublesome place. It was not until '52-53 that he underwent his transformation from pleasure-loving king to wily and determined politician. He then led and

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<sup>2</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 53.

secured Cambodia's independence in '53 after nearly a century of colonial rule. Two years later, he abdicated in favor of his father, becoming prime minister and foreign minister instead.

What caused his transformation?

During my excursion to Cambodia, someone told me that as a young man, Sihanouk's advisor once encouraged him to see his country. French officials arranged for the young prince to travel to areas throughout Cambodia, including, as Sihanouk proudly recounts, "on elephant back from the Tonle Sap to Koh Kong."<sup>3</sup> He identified with Cambodia's poor and did much to increase their feelings of self-worth and their identification with the state. By stirring their political consciousness, Sihanouk also hastened his own demise.<sup>4</sup> How so? Did his eyes open and start to sympathize for his people's needs and interests? Did this trip around Cambodia on an elephant influence his thinking and leadership style? Was his change in heart, selfless gestures or someone used to enjoying his life? We can never be sure.

It was not until 1952-1953 that he underwent his transformation from pleasure-loving king to wily and determined politician. He spent most of his time behind high walls of the Phnom Penh palace. Sihanouk saw France as playing a protector's role, most particularly against the ambitions of Vietnamese revolutionaries, but also against Thailand.<sup>5</sup> During this time, Sihanouk withdrew from confrontation, a sort of psychological retreat. For long periods he would disregard the world of politics, and sought comfort in women, filmmaking, and sports.

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<sup>3</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 243.

<sup>5</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 55.

## **Sihanouk as a Beneficiary and also an Actor in End of Colonialism (1945-1953)**

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Sihanouk craved for adulation and convinced that he alone had the foresight, the wisdom, and the semi-divine power that comes with the possession of great merit, to guide and modernize his country. The French were losing their war in Vietnam and sought to maintain a different sort of relationship with a Cambodia to be freed from direct French influence. Taking advantage on the French weakness, the Japanese government of Emperor Hirohito replaced the French, and on March 9, 1945 decided to dissolve the French colonial administration. Germany was on the verge of collapse and the Free French Forces of Charles DeGaulle were firmly in control of Paris and all of France. Soon after the surrender of the Japanese, due to US dropped atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, a new Cambodian government was established with Son Ngoc Thanh as Prime Minister. Thanh was a longstanding opponent of Sihanouk. The French then returned to occupy Cambodia in October of 1945 and Son Ngoc Thanh was later arrested for collaborating with the Japanese and sent into exile in France.

On March 1953, Sihanouk went to France and asked the French President to grant complete independence to Cambodia. The French government turned a deaf ear to Sihanouk's demand and instead accused him of being too alarmist. They threatened to replace the Sihanouk if he continued to be uncooperative. The whole Indochina soon was in turmoil. Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and the Khmer Issaraks resisted and fought the French. On July 3, 1953, the French declared they were ready to talk. Sihanouk insisted on his own terms, demanding total control of Cambodia in four main areas: National Defense, Police, Judiciary, and Finance.

On November 9, 1953 Cambodia gained its independence from France. Sihanouk believed that he secured Cambodia's independence from French colonial rule, and sought to protect his country from the repercussions of Great Power rivalries, which were France, Japan, Vietnam, and the United States. Regardless, independence enabled Cambodia, at Geneva in 1954, to escape division into separate areas of control for government and insurgent forces, such as in Laos.<sup>6</sup>

The pace of economic progress had been hindered under the French rule. As the country emerged into independence, problems of irrigation and industrial development, of education and health, communications and transport, and military maintenance, which had been long neglected, needed much attention. Thus, the country had to rely on outside aid. Even after the country became free, the governmental tax receipts fell substantially.<sup>7</sup> The United States removed a heavy burden on the national budget by undertaking to meet the cost of maintaining and equipping the Cambodian army.<sup>8</sup>

## **Sihanouk as a Unifying Figure in the Fifties (1953-1960)**

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Sihanouk was idolized by many Cambodians, especially in the countryside, as semi-divine. To him, his decisions and policies were always for his nation's people. He had a strong sense of pride and was a huge romantic. In Phnom Penh and other major provincial capitals, post-Independence period liberated a flood of creativity in arts, music, and architecture. King

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<sup>6</sup> Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 277.

<sup>7</sup> Norodom Sihanouk, *Analyse de la Conference du Prince Norodom Sihanouk à Kampot* (Phnom Penh, April 6, 1956), 6.

<sup>8</sup> V.M. Reddi, "A Study of Cambodia's Neutralism," vol. 2, no. 2 of *International Studies*, 201, Sage Publications, January 1960, assessed February 28, 2013, <http://isq.sagepub.com/content/2/2/190.full.pdf>.

Sihanouk played a major role in encouraging and mentoring – development, planning, housing, and seeking a cosmopolitan lifestyle in Cambodia.

Under the guidance of Sihanouk, not only were new schools put in place, but he helped rebuild the Capital city, Phnom Penh through a new golden era of architecture. This new movement “New Khmer Architecture” was often characterized as a mix of Bauhaus (European post-modern architecture) and traditional elements from Angkor (Ancient Cambodia). In 1956, Vann Molyvann, who studied in the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, was nominated as chief national architect by the King. Molyvann supervised the design and construction of new towns such as Tioulongville (Kirirom) and Sihanoukville (Kompong Som) and important town plans such as the Bassac development in Phnom Penh. Molyvann also built cultural facilities such as the National Theatre Preah Suramarit and the Exhibition Hall neighbored with large housing experiments, Council of Ministers building (demolished 2008), the Preah Suramarit National Theater (demolished 2008), and National Sports Complex which was once the most prized arena in all of Southeast Asia. It was through initiatives such as these, which helped improve education and health in the wake of colonialism, and the so-called process of nation building.

## Neutralism in the 1960's

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King Sihanouk often stressed that the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) had diverted his country into a nation of beggars, dependent on foreign donors for handouts. In 1963, Sihanouk tried to keep his country neutral during an escalating conflict between the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese. Hence in an effort to maintain this

neutrality, he decided to cut off all economic and military support from the U.S. In that same year he would nationalize all Cambodian imports and exports. Historian David Chandler comes to the defense of Sihanouk's foreign policies, saying they "seem more defensible than his domestic ones."<sup>9</sup> In November 1963, Sihanouk broke off the U.S. military aid program, which then put a 15 percent dent to the national budget. "His motives in cutting off U.S. aid were related to his desire to stay out of the Vietnam War and to maintain good relations with members of the Communist bloc."<sup>10</sup> Sihanouk's foreign policies consisted of: a friendship with China, a drive to get as many foreign patrons as possible, and a secret alliance with North Vietnam.

In July 1963, Pol Pot and most of the central committee of People Republic of Kampuchea left Phnom Penh to establish an insurgent base in Ratanakiri Province in the northeast. Pol Pot had shortly before been put on a list of 34 leftists who were summoned by Sihanouk to join the government and sign statements saying Sihanouk was the only possible leader for the country. Pol Pot and Chou Chet were the only people on the list who escaped. Soon after, Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, sought to establish an agrarian society unburdened by social hierarchies. Trying to restore relationships with the west, Sihanouk allowed USA and South Vietnam to enter Cambodia in their fight against communists. An adviser to King Norodom Sihamoni, Son Soubert, said that Sihanouk's shift in alliances were not the sign of a character flaw, but merely a survival tactic:

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<sup>9</sup> Ly Chheng, Yannek Smith, and Huy Samphors, from Rutgers Newark University, "Sihanouk Era: Prince Sihanouk's Genocide," from *Cambodia: Anatomy of a Genocide*, Google Sites, assessed February 18, 2013, <https://sites.google.com/site/anatomyofagenocidecambodia/timeline-1/>.

<sup>10</sup> Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 245.



"One thing they usually accused him of is he is a mercurial prince. But to defend Cambodia, you have to react to the international events," Human Rights Party deputy president Son Soubert wrote. "We are a small country. We have to turn with the wind."<sup>11</sup>

There is no doubt that particularly during the 1960s, educational opportunities expanded in Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk invested heavily in education, spending 20% of the national budget. He had an ambivalent attitude towards formal learning. No universities existed in Cambodia in 1955. In the thirteen years between the founding of Sangkum in 1955 to 1968, there was a huge increase dramatically in numbers of educational institutions and students under Sihanouk.

## Sihanouk's Legacy

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Through absolute rule, King Sihanouk fought and protected to maintain control and seek neutrality for the Cambodian people, even during times when the nation felt the pull of hegemonic powers due to the suppression of dissent and political opponents, such as the Vietnamese. When the Vietnam War threatened to engulf the region, King Sihanouk tried to carve out a neutral role for Cambodia, siding neither with the United States nor the Communists. King Sihanouk's past political decisions and unprecedented power as sole ruler of Cambodia after Independence constitute today as precious testimonials and give invaluable insights into Cambodia's history, and recreate a fascinating and devastating period in Asian history from 1954 to 1970. Criticized throughout his life for these dramatic shifts in allegiances, King Sihanouk said he followed only one course in politics: "the defense of the independence,

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony Kuhn, "King Sihanouk, An Artist And Architect Of Cambodia," NPR, October 15, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/15/162955076/king-sihanouk-an-artist-and-architect-of-cambodia>.

the territorial integrity and the dignity of my country and my people.” Although King Sihanouk ruled Cambodia with overwhelming authority and an iron-fist, he was also driven to re-build the Capital Phnom Penh, and improve education and health in the wake of colonialism for his nation. In the subsequent chapters, we will study Sihanouk’s attempts to modernize a nation within less than twenty years post-independence.

# Chapter One

## Prince Sihanouk's Emergence as an Autocrat following Independence

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*I reserve the right to act according to my consciousness as a Cambodian and in the behalf of what I believe to be the medium-and long-term interests of my country and my people.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, March 1970<sup>12</sup>

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On March 12, 1945, during the Japanese occupation, Prince Sihanouk declared for Cambodia's independent, anti-colonial government. Two months later, Son Ngoc Thanh (1908-1977), became the first prime minister to the new regime. Thanh was a republican, right-wing, antimonarchist, socialist, as well as a longstanding opponent of Sihanouk. This government was deposed by the Allies in October. Many of Son Ngoc Thanh's supporters escaped and continued to fight for independence as the Khmer Issarak. The Khmer Issarak ("Free Khmers"), an anti-French, Khmer nationalist political movement, was backed by the government of Thailand. By early September, the Japanese had surrendered to the Allies and brought the hostilities of World War II to a close. With the restoration of French control in October, he was later arrested, and sent into exile first in Saigon and then in France.<sup>13</sup> Sihanouk's uncle, Prince Monireth Sisowath, succeeded Thanh as Prime Minister of Cambodia, during the French Protectorate Period, from October 17, 1945 to December 15, 1946.

On January 7, 1946, Monireth, Sihanouk, and delegates selected from the pro-French bureaucratic elite, signed a *modus vivendi*. Under the terms of the agreement, "France was to

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<sup>12</sup> Norodom Sihanouk and Wilfred Burchett, *My War with the CIA: The Memoirs of Prince Norodom Sihanouk* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Press, 1974), 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975* (London: Verso, 1985), 51.

return to a Cambodia that was no longer styled a protectorate, but rather an autonomous kingdom within the French Union.”<sup>14</sup> Although France was to control the key areas of defense and foreign affairs, the *modus vivendi* document recognized that the king would have authority in internal affairs. In addition, this agreement prompted for further negotiations that needed to take place. Thus, a Franco-Cambodian commission was set up to draft the constitution. Among key components of the initial draft were provisions for a limited male suffrage, and allowed, for the first time in the country’s history, the emergence of political pluralism.<sup>15</sup>

On March-April of 1946, two principal parties took shape, each headed by members of the royal family: Democratic Party (Krom Pracheathipodei) and Liberal Party (Kanaq Sereipheap; literally, “Freedom Group”). The Democratic Party, led by young Prince Sisowath Yuthevong (1912-47), drew support mostly from the middle class of the bureaucracy, which included teachers, students, young civil servants, the Buddhist monastic order, and associates of Thanh. The Democrats took care to nominate candidates who commanded widespread local support, often choosing former monks or achar.<sup>16</sup> The Democratic Party’s slogan was "Peace, Independence, Discipline and Courage," and its electoral symbol was an elephant's head and three lotus flowers.<sup>17</sup> It was the first political organization in Cambodia was oriented toward the future, and the biggest force representing Khmer nationalism.<sup>18</sup> Whereas, the Liberal party,

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<sup>14</sup> David P. Chandler et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*, edited by David Joel Steinberg (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 374.

<sup>15</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 50; see also Chandler et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia*, 374.

<sup>16</sup> David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 31-32.

<sup>17</sup> Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, trans. Mark W. McLeod (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 51.

<sup>18</sup> David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 22.

led by Prince Norodom Norindeth (1906-1975?), tended to be more conservative, less republican, more pro-French, and promised to uphold the status quo.<sup>19</sup>

The elections showed the Democratic Party capturing two-thirds of the seats for the consultative assembly. However its ideals of independence and democracy proved very difficult to realize due to the combined opposition from the French, Sihanouk, and the traditional economic elite. By 1946, still only 24 years old, Sihanouk had also fathered six acknowledged children.<sup>20</sup> In July 1947, Yuthevong's premature and allegedly mysterious death in a French hospital was a blow to the Democrats, but they again won easily in the December elections, occupying fifty-four of the seventy-six seats in the newly formed National Assembly.<sup>21</sup>

For the remainder of the 1940s, the Democrats presided over a series of regimes which were "powerless vis-à-vis the French and increasingly quarrelsome with Sihanouk, whose own advisers were drawn from the bureaucratic elite and from relatively right-wing political groupings not represented in the Assembly."<sup>22</sup> The Democratic Assembly had opposed the commitment of Khmer troops to the French, in their struggle against the Viet Minh in Vietnam itself, pointing out that Cambodia must live at peace with its neighbors.<sup>23</sup> Sihanouk resented the Khmer Issarak and the Democrat Party criticisms of his subservience to the French. They aimed to expel the French colonial authorities from Cambodia. What Sihanouk initially feared was the political threat they represented to the stability of the social hierarchy, but increasingly he also soon came to agree with their goal of full-fledged independence from France. Thus, on

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<sup>19</sup> James A. Tyner, *The Killing of Cambodia: Geography, Genocide, and the Unmasking of Space* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 39; see also Chandler et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia*, 374.

<sup>20</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 53

<sup>21</sup> Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Chandler et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia*, 374.

<sup>23</sup> Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 72.

September 1949, Sihanouk, presumably under French pressure, dissolved the National Assembly. The Democrats had angered Sihanouk and local conservatives who preferred to put law and order before either parliamentary government or independence.<sup>24</sup>

In 1951-2, Sihanouk became more popular, more active, and more self-confident.<sup>25</sup> In 1952, Sihanouk campaigned to be appointed the crown. He won under a “Royal Crusade for Independence” born on a wave of popular feeling for him.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, as he moved closer to genuine power, he overrode the 1947 constitution. He claimed that within his rights because as King, he had promulgated the document.<sup>27</sup> That same year, Sihanouk received a critical open letter from several leftist Cambodian students in Paris, among them Ieng Sary, Saloth Sar, and Hou Youn (but not Khieu Samphan). They gained notoriety, and in the letter, they called Sihanouk the “strangler of infant democracy.”<sup>28</sup> In 1953 Sihanouk attempted to oust the Viet Minh from Cambodia. By the middle of 1953, more than half of the countryside was effectively under insurgent control, and the military was crumbling. “Dissatisfied with the pace of French concessions, Sihanouk embarked on what he called a crusade for independence, aimed at embarrassing the French, by calling attention to their recalcitrance in public statements he issued while traveling abroad. He used unconventional diplomatic methods. The young 31-year-old monarch traveled to a number of foreign capitals, displaying a “zestful capacity for public relations, which he has utilized, often to excess, in his international dealings ever

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Vickery, “Looking Back at Cambodia” *Westerly*, 4 (1976): 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ian Mabbet and David Chandler, *The Khmers* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 239.

<sup>26</sup> Hélène Cixous, *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*, trans. Juliet Flower MacCannell, Judith Pike, and Lollie Groth, intro. Juliet Flower MacCannell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), xxvii.

<sup>27</sup> Mabbet and Chandler, *The Khmers*, 239.

<sup>28</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, *Cambodia: A Country Study*, edited by Russell R. Ross, Area handbook series, research completed December 1987, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 39; see also Sihanouk and Burchett, *My War with the CIA*, 160.

since.”<sup>29</sup> The emergence of independent Cambodia succeeded, as Sihanouk later put it, “without a shot being fired.”<sup>30</sup>

To make his country completely independent, Sihanouk wanted to free self from the binding pattern of royal privileges and rituals, which he found suffocating, and instead he wanted to grow closer to his people and create the ideal conditions for building a true democratic regime.

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*Now that independence had been gained, the next problem was to see that it was maintained... The warring political factions within Cambodia wanted to make of me a mere figurehead who could be ignored in their wrangling... I also wanted to stand on my own feet politically and measure myself against my opponents in the political arena instead of basing my authority on my heredity.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>31</sup>

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His first concern was not to owe his throne to any foreign power, including France, and to seek his legitimacy through the people.<sup>32</sup> Much of Sihanouk’s success was in the elimination of the weak parliament, and on November 9, 1953, France granted Cambodia complete independence, including command over its armed forces and right to send diplomats abroad. This gave Sihanouk a mandate to rule without political parties. However, it was not until a year later that Cambodia gained economic and monetary independence from France.<sup>33</sup>

In 1954, the formation of the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed, but instead of On May 8, 1954, the Geneva Conference on Indochina convened. Represented at the conference were the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, the Chinese

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Leifer, *Cambodia: The Search for Security* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1967), 21.

<sup>30</sup> Sihanouk, *War and Hope*, xix.

<sup>31</sup> Sihanouk and Burchett, *My War with the CIA*, 159.

<sup>32</sup> Sihanouk, *War and Hope*, xx.

<sup>33</sup> Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins, *Building Cambodia: New Khmer Architecture 1953-1970* (Bangkok: The Key Publisher, 2006), 43.

People's Republic, Laos, the Republic of Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and Cambodia. On July 20 at midnight, Nhiek Tiouleng (Minister of State for Foreign Affairs at the Geneva Conference, later became the first General of the Royal Cambodian Army) concluded a bilateral Armistice Treaty with Ta Quang Buu (Commander-in-Chief of the North Vietnamese Army), whereby the latter pledge to withdraw all its troops from Cambodia within a four-month timescale.<sup>34</sup> At the conference, Cambodia emerged as a "winner," at least in anti-Communist terms, "partly because its delegations was more independent that those of Laos and southern Vietnam, partly because the military situation in Cambodia still was not as favorable to the Communists as it was elsewhere in Indochina, and partly because its delegation stood up to the Great Powers at the conference, insisting on getting their own way on several issues."<sup>35</sup>

Agreements reached at the conference required Cambodia to conduct elections before the end of 1955. Sihanouk then mandated three motions, which placed him even more firmly in control by the end of the year. These three essential arrangements changed the face of Cambodian political life.

First, Sihanouk held a popular referendum on his crusade for independence on February 7, 1955. One ballot, colored white, had his portrait on it and the word "yes."<sup>36</sup> The other was black, with the word "no" inscribed on it. Balloting was open, and over a million citizens handed white ballots to the government officials who manned the voting tables. According to

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<sup>34</sup> Tipram Poivre, *The Adoptive Father: An Unusual Portrait of King Sihanouk of Cambodia* (Syllabaire Editions, 2012) Kindle edition.

<sup>35</sup> Chandler et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia*, 375.

<sup>36</sup> Chandler et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia*, 375.



official statistics, fewer than two thousand had the temerity to oppose the king. The exact numbers were 925,667 Yes (99.8%) and 1,834 No (0.2%).<sup>37</sup>

Second, Sihanouk proposed to amend the constitution so as to grant sweeping executive powers to himself. Because he encountered strong opposition from the elite, in a “tactical master-stroke,” he abdicated the throne so as to enter politics as a “private citizen.”<sup>38</sup> His abdication even took his parents by surprise.

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*On 2 March 1955, I sent an envelope to the Phnom Penh radio station together with instructions that it be opened at noon, and the recorded tape inside be played during the midday news. In this way the Cambodian people learned, to their great amazement, that I had renounced the throne... I had made the decision entirely on my own, and taken no one into my confidence. According to the 1947 constitution, in such a case the Crown Council must elect a successor from among the male descendants of King Ang Duong.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>39</sup>

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Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his father H.M. King Norodom Suramarit in order to devote himself to political affairs. Suramarit was an experienced civil servant with no political ambitions. According to one report, Sihanouk forced the kingship onto him by threatening to leave the country if Suramarit refused the honor.<sup>40</sup> This decision of turning the throne to his father, enabled Sihanouk to engage in politics directly without any limitations that would have imposed on him as a monarch. He entered the “domestic political fray with all the prestige of a king while insisting that he was a simple citizen.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz, and Christof Hartmann, *Elections in Asia: A data handbook, Volume II* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), 68; see also Sihanouk and Burchett, *My War with the CIA*, 158.

<sup>38</sup> Chandler et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia*, 375.

<sup>39</sup> Sihanouk and Burchett, *My War with the CIA*, 158.

<sup>40</sup> Norodom Sihanouk, *Souvenirs doux et amers*, 216 ff. Sim Var interview, November 1987.

<sup>41</sup> Milton Osborne, *Phnom Penh: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123.

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*The palace is stuffed full of a hierarchy of court mandarins and intriguers. They are like the blood-sucking leeches that attach themselves to the feet of the elephants. Being a prisoner of protocol, fawned on by all sorts of timeservers awaiting my favours, was something I detested... I remained the traditional 'God-King'. I summed up all this up in my broadcast adding: This is why I took the definite decision to abandon the throne, its pomp and pageantry, in order to devote my whole time and energies to serve the people and their well-being.*

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Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>42</sup>

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In early April, Sihanouk's final move was announcing the foundation of national political movement, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, also known as the People's Socialist Community (literally "organization devoted to the commoners"). Sihanouk assumed leadership of the newly formed political party. It was a mass movement that was never a political "party" as Sihanouk repeatedly insisted and instead was "designed to incorporate all Cambodians" regardless of political sympathies.<sup>43</sup> Despite its apolitical image, the Sangkum effectively functioned as the pro-Sihanouk party. Membership required complete loyalty to the Cambodian throne and Sihanouk's policies. Members of the movement could not belong to any other political party but were eligible to stand as candidates for the Assembly. The abdication of Suramarit and formation of a ruling political party gave Sihanouk the pillars for national reorganization in the wake of the Colonial Era, and the rise of Cambodia's "golden age," often referred to as "Sihanouk Time, 1953-1970."<sup>44</sup>

Sihanouk's emergence as a major actor on his country's political stage, gave him immense power and increasing international popularity. It has been suggested that the "prosperity and happiness of the Sangkum period may be exaggerated in popular memory in

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<sup>42</sup> Sihanouk and Burchett, *My War with the CIA*, 162.

<sup>43</sup> Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, 123-124.

<sup>44</sup> Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, 123.

light of what subsequently occurred.”<sup>45</sup> Sihanouk administered his country formally through a cabinet that had the responsibility to an elected national assembly. The Sangkum were deeply rooted in the principles of Buddhist socialism, and claimed to seek progressive goals and the end of social injustice.

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*Buddha did not give up that fight during the period of his life following his Illumination. He fought against dishonesty, theft, deceit, and lies, as well as the privileges the Brahmin caste considered it right... In man's will to go beyond himself, in his personal search for truth, as well as his sacrifices to help his fellow man, and in this form Buddhism is the finest ideal which could inspire our socialism.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>46</sup>

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It was based solely around the conservative religious and social traditions of Cambodia. Rather than doing away with private property, Buddhist socialism encouraged the wealthy to give to the poor in order to gain merit.<sup>47</sup>

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*The aim, I said, was 'to give birth to a truly democratic, equalitarian, and socialist Cambodia, to restore the past greatness of our motherland'. Many of my loyal supporters promptly forgot the words 'democratic, equalitarian, and socialist' and began to dream up ways to use the Sangkum to further their own private ambitions.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>48</sup>

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On September 1955, the National Assembly elections took place. The campaign for this election had been the most documented of Sihanouk's campaign. The Sangkum Reastr Niyum

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<sup>45</sup> Joakim Öjendal and Mona Lilja, editors, *Beyond Democracy in Cambodia: Political Reconstruction in a Post-Conflict Society* (Copenhagen: NIAS – Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2009), 26.

<sup>46</sup> Sihanouk, *War and Hope*, xxi; from Philippe Peschez: *Essai sur la démocratie cambodienne*.

<sup>47</sup> David M. Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis: Education, Development, and the State in Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 34-35.

<sup>48</sup> Sihanouk and Burchett, *My War with the CIA*, 161-162.

dominated Cambodian politics, rapidly marginalizing the Democrat Party and all other electoral contenders, until Sihanouk's overthrow in 1970.<sup>49</sup>

Sihanouk's campaign was marked by widespread corruption and substantial violence.<sup>50</sup> Terror was used as a weapon against candidates and their supporters by all sides, but most particularly by those backing the Sangkum. The Sangkum intimidated their opponents by "disrupting rallies, assaulting vote canvassers, and ensuring that only Sangkum poster were left untouched."<sup>51</sup> There were numerous reports from nongovernment newspapers in the summer of 1955, stating encounters of intimidation towards non-Sangkum candidates.<sup>52</sup>

The local Agence France-Presse correspondent reported that observers "had some reservations about certain aspects of the voting process: unusual deployment of police forces, absence of opposition voting slips, and arrests of left-wing leaders."<sup>53</sup> On one occasion, Sihanouk's security forces forced Cambodians to swear before groups of monks on the grounds of Buddhist monasteries that they would vote for the Sangkum.<sup>54</sup> David Chandler has now published convincing new evidence that Sangkum candidates were, in fact, defeated in five constituencies.

The caliber of many Sangkum candidates was low. In Battambang, past prime minister Huy Kanthoul encountered "a Sino-Khmer who could barely read a word of Cambodian," while in Svay Rien, one Sangkum candidate was a nineteen-year-old popular singer who had

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<sup>49</sup> Öjendal and Lilja, *Beyond Democracy in Cambodia*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 97-98.

<sup>51</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 97.

<sup>52</sup> Vickery, "Looking Back at Cambodia," 98.

<sup>53</sup> Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 160.

<sup>54</sup> Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 82.

somehow come to Sihanouk's attention.<sup>55</sup> Other recruits included former Renovation party members who had been defeated in 1947 or 1951.

It is quite obvious that Sihanouk knew that his supporters had resorted to violence to maintain him in power. Sihanouk's desire to maintain control of the monarchy, influenced this. He sanctioned that violence, since "he could not conceive that his opponents could be other than foolish, at best, or more likely motivated by evil intent towards him personally, at worst."<sup>56</sup> Finally, ballot boxes were tampered with after the vote, to eliminate candidates of the left.<sup>57</sup> It ensured that the Sangkum would have won a majority of the seats in the election.

Capitalizing on his "newly discovered oratorical skills," Sihanouk made full use of the freedom from "kingly restraints to carry his arguments to the people."<sup>58</sup> His message was simple, where a vote for the Sangkum also meant a vote for his policies. The results: Sangkum won all ninety-one seats. The Sangkum received 83 percent of the votes, the Democrats 13 percent, and the Pracheachon only three percent. The Liberals and four other small parties received a total of less than one percent. The Sangkum was more like a political tool used to exterminate the other parties, and further strengthen Sihanouk's monarch.

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*I had never expected a victory of such embarrassing magnitude... Six months after I had abdicated, I found myself in the political forefront of the country as Prime Minister for a political grouping which held all the seats in the National Assembly!*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 82.

<sup>56</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 97.

<sup>57</sup> Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 160.

<sup>58</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 98.

<sup>59</sup> Sihanouk and Burchett, *My War with the CIA*, 163.

Two weeks after the elections, the first Sangkum National Congress was held. Some historic measures were decided: the vote for women; the Khmer language as the only one to be used in public institutions; mandates of deputies could be withdrawn if a majority of voters in their electorate so desired.<sup>60</sup> The legitimacy and possibly the presence of the commune chiefs, commonly referred to as ‘fatherly figures’, seems to have been fairly high. However, they were only moderately involved in promoting development, and the source of their relative legitimacy was their identity as the local arm of the Sihanouk rather than their promotion of local development.<sup>61</sup> Instead, tax and data collection seemed to have been the primary local development.

Sihanouk dominated political life for the next fifteen years by organizing and relying on Cambodian youth. On September 5, 1957, the Junior Section of the Sangkum – the Jeunesse socialiste royale khmère (royal Khmer socialist youth, or JSRK) was created. Civil servants and students comprised its membership, and it served only as a façade: there was no civic and even less political training. Members were traditionally children of Sangkum members and those who make a good showing in the secondary schools.

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*Once a year, we took a training course lasting three days to learn how to march and salute. We were told to love the monarchy and the country but were given no explanation... For me, being in the JSRK meant having a pretty uniform for parading around in front of the girls. In any case, it was hard to refuse; almost all the young people were in it.*

Former member of the JSRK<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Sihanouk and Burchett, *My War with the CIA*, 164.

<sup>61</sup> Öjendal and Lilja, *Beyond Democracy in Cambodia*, 113.

<sup>62</sup> Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, 64.

A crisis rose on April 3, 1960 when King Suramarit died at the age of 65. It was the beginning of Sihanouk's deterioration of power. Following his father's death in 1960, Sihanouk won general election as head of state, but received the title of Prince rather than King. In 1963, he made a change in the constitution that made him head of state for life.

By 1962, Sihanouk's popularity had reached its max. Cambodia was at peace. Many young members of the elite had just returned from studies abroad, and took up positions in the government. Foreign aid came in sufficient quantities to offset annual budget deficits.

In the spring of 1965, Sihanouk made a pact with North Vietnam and the People's Republic of China to allow the presence of permanent North Vietnamese bases in eastern Cambodia and to allow military supplies from China to reach Vietnam by Cambodian ports. On May 3 of the same year, Sihanouk announced that Cambodia would break off diplomatic relations with the United States because of Cambodia's alliance with China.

By 1967, a peasant uprising in Samlaut in the northwest Cambodia was brutally suppressed by Sihanouk's forces. Scholars believe that perhaps as many as ten thousand people were massacred before order was restored. The Cambodian National Assembly, headed by Prime Minister Lon Nol, voted to remove Sihanouk from his position as the Head of State of the Kingdom of Cambodia effective March 18, 1970, and eventually Sihanouk was sent to exile on March 22 of that same year. This was the end of Sihanouk's 'golden years'.

In the wake of Cambodia's colonial era, Sihanouk emerged as a determined autocratic ruler. He guided his country's political stage, through immense power and increasing international popularity, with assistance from his Sangkum supporters. In the subsequent chapter, we will continue in greater detail, of Sihanouk's efforts to transform Phnom Penh into

a spectacular capital that would symbolize the new path he sought to blaze in contemporary Cambodian history. How did Sihanouk beautify a small country patch into one of the most dazzling jewel in Southeast Asia?



# Chapter Two

## Rebuilding Phnom Penh as an Imperial Capital

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*An old woman's [her name, Penh] discovery of a Buddha image floating miraculously downstream, was concocted after the city had come to life, under a name suggestive of its location at the crossroad of two rivers, a name that has survived into modern Khmer as Chaomuk, or "four faces," an interesting echo of the iconography of the Bayon.*

David P. Chandler<sup>63</sup>

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Travel by road from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap and the Angkor ruins did not become an option until after the First World War.<sup>64</sup> Founded in 1434, Phnom Penh is located on the banks of the Tonlé Sap, Mekong and Bassac rivers. Once known as the "Pearl of Asia", Phnom Penh was considered one of the loveliest French-built cities in Indochina.<sup>65</sup> From the 1920s and over the next four decades, the city and Cambodia continued to experience a tremendous growth and prosperity until the civil wars that began in the 1970s.<sup>66</sup>

### French Protectorate of Cambodia (1863-1953)

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Urban planning in the late nineteenth century in Indochina had been concerned principally with forcibly stamping a French presence on these newly conquered territories (Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos). The French military believed that they had to establish an

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<sup>63</sup> Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 94.

<sup>64</sup> Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, 98.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Heinzl, *Cambodia Calling: A Memoir from the Frontlines of Humanitarian Aid* (Wiley, John & Sons, Incorporated, 2009), eBook.

<sup>66</sup> Heinzl, *Cambodia Calling*.

authoritarian regime which would crush indigenous revolt.<sup>67</sup> Military buildings were in the initial urban plans, and the rebuilding was “intended to assert a domineering and inviolable image of the imperial nation.”<sup>68</sup> The buildings were formalist and grandiose: their ornamentation made reference to classical and baroque monuments, and also represented a “visible expression of the universality of Western concepts of beauty and order.”<sup>69</sup>

An example of a masterpiece of colonial design, the National Museum of Cambodia was built over three years between 1917 and mid-1920s by George Groslier (1888-1945). Groslier designed the museum with striking evocations of traditional Cambodian architecture, and was its director until 1942.<sup>70</sup> The museum was originally named Musée Albert Sarraut after the then Governor-General of Indochina.<sup>71</sup> In 1923, Ernest Hébrard (1875 – 1933) was appointed as head of the Indochina Architecture and Town Planning Service. Hébrard spent much time photographing and studying indigenous architecture, such as the Angkor Wat, Buddhist pagodas, and simple rural dwellings.<sup>72</sup> His principal aim was to find local antecedents for official structures, and sought to strike a balance between tradition and modernism, industrial growth and cultural respect.<sup>73</sup> Instead, many of his buildings, such as, “resembled a pastiche of exotic superimposed upon a Beaux-Arts plan, rather than the more radical change in direction which he advocated. Sitting on a wide, tree-lined avenue, the Raffles Hotel Le Royal,

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<sup>67</sup> Nicola Cooper, “Urban Planning and Architecture in Colonial Indochina,” vol. 31, no. 11 of *French Cultural Studies* (2000): 76, assessed April 21, 2013, doi:10.1177/095715580001103105.

<sup>68</sup> Cooper, “Urban Planning,” 76-77.

<sup>69</sup> Cooper, “Urban Planning,” 77.

<sup>70</sup> Osborne, *Phnom Penh*, 85.

<sup>71</sup> “Information for Visitors, Streetscapes of Phnom Penh, A Leisurely Architectural Exploration,” 2013, National Museum of Cambodia, assessed on April 21, 2013, [http://cambodiamuseum.info/en\\_information\\_visitors/streetscapes.html](http://cambodiamuseum.info/en_information_visitors/streetscapes.html).

<sup>72</sup> Cooper, “Urban Planning,” 85-86.

<sup>73</sup> Cooper, “Urban Planning,” 86.

established in 1929 and built by Hébrard, is distinguished by its blend of Khmer, Art Deco, and French colonial architecture.<sup>74</sup>

By the 1920s the Angkor ruins were attracting visitors in increasing numbers, among them William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965). Maugham, a British playwright of French descent, was among the most popular writers of his era and reputedly the highest paid author during the 1930s. During his 1922 visit, he wrote that the Phnom Penh was “a hybrid town built by the French and inhabited by the Chinese; it has broad streets with arcades in which are Chinese shops, formal gardens and, facing the river a quay neatly planted with trees like the quay in a French riverside town.” Hotel accommodations during the 1920s were scarce in Phnom Penh, and varied in quality. Maugham found his hotel “large, dirty and pretentious,” while the Royal Palace afforded him the opportunity to amuse himself “with sundry reflections upon the trappings of royalty, the passing of empire, and the deplorable tastes in art of crowned heads.” While other visitors argued, that the hotels were comfortable but expensive.

In the 1920s, there was also an economic boom that affected most of Indochina. Rice exports and rubber plantations in Cambodia produced revenue for French investors and spawned the beginnings of a proletariat. Taxation was also extremely high in Cambodia. Automobiles were the transport of choice for the colonizers. Eventually, the French did build a railroad, known as the Trans-Indochina Line. Between 1928 and 1932, this 500-kilometer (300-mile) stretch of railroad was built between Phnom Penh and Battambang, and it was later extended to the Thai border. Investments in public works reaped large profits for shareholders

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<sup>74</sup> “City guide: Phnom Penh, Cambodia,” Scotland on Sunday, February 28, 2012, Johnston Publishing Ltd, assessed on April 21, 2013, <http://www.scotsman.com/scotland-on-sunday/scotland/city-guide-phnom-penh-cambodia-1-2140373>.

in France. In addition, these changes also meant that thousands of rural Cambodians were now able to move rapidly around the country by bus, and visits to Phnom Penh became easier and more frequent.<sup>75</sup>

In the late 19th century, Phnom Penh was partitioned into ethnic sectors or quartiers. Hébrard and his colleague, Daniel Fabré worked from the late 19th to early 20th century to construct the necessary administrative public and private buildings with Phnom Penh soon dubbed ‘the Paris of the East’. During a brief stopover in 1936, Charlie Chaplin commented with surprise when he discovered in Phnom Penh, “... certain reclaimed avenues (that had recently been laid over former canals) as being ‘little sisters’ to the grand Champs Elysées in Paris.”<sup>76</sup>

An area of gracious villas, their steep roofs and decorative ironwork suggest they had been plucked in their entirety from provincial France. Throughout the entire period that Cambodia was under French control, even in the years after the Second World War, Phnom Penh remained an out-of-the-way location, scarcely known by comparison with two much larger cities in Vietnam, Hanoi, and Saigon. It was more of a brief stopping place before travelling on to the Angkor ruins.

## **Sihanouk Establishes a New Capital in the Wake of French Colonialism**

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With independence successfully achieved, Phnom Penh was poised to experience the most dramatic series of changes that had ever taken place in its existence as the country’s

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<sup>75</sup> Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 195.

<sup>76</sup> “Streetscapes of Phnom Penh.”

modern capital. The day of independence, marked ninety years since France had established a position in Cambodia, and eighty-seven years since Sihanouk's great-grandfather had moved his capital from Udong to Phnom Penh. The day Phnom Penh became capital, it a town of around 350,000 people. Why did he make this decision? The Royal Palace's location, as well as the Prince's birthplace could be the reasons for Sihanouk's decision of reestablishing the imperial capital in Phnom Penh. In his drive to rebuild Phnom Penh, Prince Sihanouk established an architectural movement called the New Khmer Architecture. The movement was founded in 1953 with Cambodia's independence, and reached its climax during the 1960s. It came to an end in 1970 with the overthrow of Sihanouk. The style blended elements of the Modern Architecture, (clarity of simple forms and visual emphasis on horizontal, vertical lines, and ornamented with lavish details such as swags, medallions, flowers, and shields), with two distinctly Cambodian traditions: the vernacular tradition of the majority of Cambodians' houses during the time, and the grand tradition of the Ancient City of Angkor.

In this chapter, we will examine the influential role Sihanouk has had on architecture and the public imagination of the imperial capital. Architecture is a manifestation and testament to the social values of its time. This process of nation-building was instrumental in the process of molding a national identity, whilst using the power of the state. Major infrastructure developments within the capital were needed to ensure the social harmony and economic growth of the nation as a whole. As the leader in the movement, Sihanouk aimed to unify and build the capital into an internationally recognized, peaceful space.

## The Reality Builder

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*Norodom Sihanouk demanded the highest standards of design, functional buildings and public works. He was the ideal client, pushing his architects to their limits and supporting creativity in all areas of society. Client and architect are wedded in a relationship that requires mutual trust and respect. The role of the public client is to support the architect by finding the money and recognizing the quality of the design, striving for something even more radical than the architect had dared. With a client like Norodom Sihanouk, the architects had to be talented.*

Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins<sup>77</sup>

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With Sihanouk as their patron, influential architects to the New Khmer Architecture were able to rebuild an unknown town into a magnificent imperial capital in the heart of Southeast Asia. Many of Sihanouk's architects were talented, extremely passionate and hardworking. In terms of quality and quantity, there was only one who was the most prominent—Van Molyvann (1926-present).

Coming from humble beginnings, Molyvann grew up in a traditional wooden house. Later, as a young man, he was awarded a scholarship to study law, architecture and Khmer art in France.<sup>78</sup> Hence, he left Cambodia for the first time in 1946. The École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA) was a cultural shock and Molyvann had to repeat his first year.<sup>79</sup>

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*I was a Buddhist jumping into Western architecture... Coming from Cambodia and being forced to draw Corinthian, Doric and Ionic columns was not easy but served me well in the end.*

Vann Molyvann<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 201.

<sup>78</sup> Vann Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Reyum Publishing, 2000), v.

<sup>79</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 202.

<sup>80</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 202.

While in Paris, Molyvann participated in conferences held by Le Corbusier (one of the pioneers of Modern Architecture) and American architect Paul Rudolph (who used natural concrete to build the Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Molyvann also headed the Khmer Association of Students at the Maison du Cambodge, and met and married his first wife, the daughter of architect Henri Marchal. In his final year, Molyvann avoided the grand designs favored by student of the Modern Movement, and instead chose to study the Brazilian vernacular architecture, which would later inspire his “military cap” design for the One Hundred Houses project in Phnom Penh.<sup>81</sup>

Returning to Cambodia from his studies in France in 1956, Molyvann became Cambodia’s first modern architect. A year later, he was promptly appointed Head of Public Works and State Architect by Sihanouk. Today, Molyvann is known as Cambodia’s first Royal Architect.

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*When I came back in 1956, it was moving to rediscover all the Khmer monuments that I looked at in a new way... Our head of state personally supports and encourages artistic accomplishment, in particular architecture. Also the Sangkum allows architects a free hand in conducting their research and their work.*

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*Interview with Vann Molyvann, A l’Ecole des Maîtres Angkoriens, 1969.*<sup>82</sup>

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Molyvann was the state architect of a Khmer autocrat—like the architect of Napoleon III or Hitler’s architect Albert Speer. From 1957 to 1971, Molyvann was determined to incorporate Cambodian tradition into his French architectural training of vernacular and monumental

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<sup>81</sup> Ross and Collins, ‘New Khmer Architecture,’ 202-203.

<sup>82</sup> Ross and Collins, ‘New Khmer Architecture,’ 206.

architecture.<sup>83</sup> The beginning of Molyvann's career was put to the test. The materials in Cambodia were limited, and there were no civil engineers, surveyors or other professionals to help at various stages from design to completion.<sup>84</sup> There was a shortage of skilled personnel. There were few building contractors, mostly French or Vietnamese, and it took time for Cambodian construction companies to develop. Only two companies survived – Comin Khmère and Khaou Chuly.

Molyvann forged a style that was bold and innovative, and maintained a certain classical balance that spoke across great cultural and temporal divides. One of his earlier commissions was in 1957, in which Cambodia commemorated the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Buddha's birth by building open-air pavilions in the gardens in front of the railway station.<sup>85</sup> Molyvann was an extremely talented and hard worker, and with Sihanouk, designed the landmarks and infrastructures of the newly independent nation: the Independence Monument, the first Pediatric Hospital, Chaktomuk Conference Hall, the National Sports Complex, the National Theater, the first higher education institution in Cambodia, the Teacher's Training College, the State Palace at Chamkar Mon, the Council of Ministers, the first airport in Siem Reap, the laboratories of the first Pasteur Institute, a number of Khmer embassies abroad, etc.

## The Visionary

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Sihanouk used the power he gained from leadership of the Sangkum to pursue his vision for his country. The Royal Khmer Socialist Youth (JSRK) also blossomed into an enormous

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<sup>83</sup> Ross and Collins, *'New Khmer Architecture,'* 205.

<sup>84</sup> Ross and Collins, *'New Khmer Architecture,'* 205.

<sup>85</sup> Ross and Collins, *'New Khmer Architecture,'* 6.



support group, and was present at almost every inauguration and staged rallies at the National Sports Complex.

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*Members practice the principles proclaimed by the boy scout movements and do at least one good deed every day. They are well behaved, helpful to other people and modest in character... Young Cambodians were eager for a better share in the exciting possibilities of the contemporary world. And they have that precious gift of optimism and faith in the future without which a nation's plans, however well laid, can come to nought.*

Norodom Sihanouk<sup>86</sup>

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Members from the JSRK benefited from an improved lifestyle, educational opportunities and prospects for the future in an economy that seemed to grow stronger with every school, university, factory, and development project inaugurated.<sup>87</sup> There was a drift of young men to the urban areas, particularly to the capital, which, in the twenty years after 1945, mushroomed from a town of 50,000 to a city of approximately 500,000.<sup>88</sup>

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*Urban migration is in part a direct result of government activity in the provinces: A taste of education beyond the facilities of the pagoda school often leaves a young man discontented with the life of his parents. Generous expenditure on education (20 percent of the annual budget), particularly at the secondary level, has intensified the inclination of a good number of Cambodia's youthful generation to move out of agricultural pursuits and to seek employment in occupations that carry greater status and financial reward.*

Michael Leifer<sup>89</sup>

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Molyvann's vision of development had always been closely associated with Sihanouk's post-Independence politics of neutrality to foster a balanced forward-looking evolution of Khmer society.

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<sup>86</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 51.

<sup>87</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 51.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Leifer, *The Search for Security*, 6.

<sup>89</sup> Leifer, *The Search for Security*, 6.

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*Sihanouk and I were colleagues. I had great respect for him. I can tell you a story about the way that he gave orders, which was inspiring. One day, in the '60s, he called me, a French-trained Khmer engineer, a physician and a few others. We had a meeting at the Royal Palace, and he said he had just come back from Indonesia ... He said: 'they have just built independence but they have plenty of universities, why do we not? This is the future!' He said, you, Molyvann, you will create the Royal University of Phnom Penh. And I received a small Italian car, and went on a hunt for students and teachers, scholars, to create the council for the university.*

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Vann Molyvann, January 2013<sup>90</sup>

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Nationwide plans formulated in the early years of Sihanouk's rule, which included agriculture, culture, education, health, industry, tourism, urbanism, and infrastructure. Crop diversification, the use of modern equipment expanded rising of livestock, the revival of rural handicrafts and peasant groups associated with the Royal Office of Cooperation, set up in 1956. Tourism prompted the development of hotels and motels, notably the Independent Hotel at Sihanoukville, which opened in 1968.

Although Sihanouk was not a qualified architect, he did personally review all the major public buildings that were being designed throughout the kingdom, and also contributed as a designer in several cases.<sup>91</sup> Sihanouk personally did the interior design work, chose the furnishings, finishes, and color schemes for the Hotel Cambodiana in Phnom Penh, which was designed by Lu Ban Hap. Lu Ban Hap (1931-present) studied with Molyvann in Paris, and in Cambodia worked with Molyvann and two French architects to design the Phnom Penh sports

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<sup>90</sup> Claire Knox, "Vann Molyvann: My Legacy Will Disappear," January 26, 2013, Projects Cambodia, Blogger, <http://projectscambodia.blogspot.com/2013/01/vann-molyvann-my-legacy-will-disappear.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 71.

Complex and the Chaktomuk Conference Hall.<sup>92</sup> In the sixties, he was also commissioned to set up the new Town Planning and Housing Department for the municipality of Phnom Penh.

For major public works, Sihanouk would summon his architects to present their designs and then, he would review them thoroughly before giving consent. Claude Bach remembered being called to Chamkar Mon to present his model of the Angkor Hotel.

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*When Norodom Sihanouk arrived, aides raised the model so that he could look at it easily. The head of Air France, the project developer, told Bach to design. "I began by saying that I collected butterflies and planned to put butterflies in all the bedrooms," he recalled. "The airline executive looked as though as he was going to die but Norodom Sihanouk thought it was a n excellent idea. We have so many beautiful butterflies here in Cambodia," he was quoted as saying. "I have fun catching them myself." Bach said Norodom Sihanouk like the design very much.*

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Interview with Lu Ban Hap, from Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins<sup>93</sup>

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Cambodia showcased the capital to the rest of the world by hosting exhibitions, festivals, and other events. In addition, Phnom Penh hosted the International Exhibition 1955 at a site next to Wat Phnom. While tourism had largely been a French colonial activity shared with the Cambodian royal family, independence brought mass tourism to the country. In a further sign of its break with the colonial past, Cambodia hosted an American Festival along the avenues leading to Wat Phnom between late 1956 and early 1957.<sup>94</sup> Internationalism characterized the first 17 years after independence.

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*Independence threw open a door that had been locked for a lifetime. Once opened, it revealed an exciting new world of new vistas and seemingly unlimited opportunities that had largely bypassed the country during the colonial era.*

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<sup>92</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 36.

<sup>93</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 73.

<sup>94</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 5-6.

Sihanouk's vision was of a modern Cambodia, proudly making its mark in the world. He focused almost entirely in Phnom Penh, and wanted to create a capital he could proudly display to international delegations and visiting heads of state.<sup>96</sup> Traditional Khmer architecture requires the close collaboration of the architect, engineer, sculptor, and builder. On March 1957, Molyvann was commissioned and responsible for completing maybe the most significant symbol of the young Cambodian nation – Independence Monument. It was completed sometime before 1962. Although the inspiration of the monument comes from Banteay Srei as Sihanouk requested, it was built with modern techniques, and integrated the complex proportions and decorative elements which are inherent to the Khmer tradition into a completely new creation. This monument made Molyvann famous and influenced the design of many other monuments that dispersed throughout the nation.

## The Preservationist

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*Like most great architecture throughout the world, the temples of Angkor arose from the belief that humanity could attain a higher level of spiritual accomplishment by constructing temples to celebrate the divine.*

Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins<sup>97</sup>

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Sihanouk followed in the footsteps of Angkorean kings, particularly his favorite role model Jayavarman VII, who built the last great city of Angkor Thom.<sup>98</sup> Elements of vernacular tradition can be seen in the adaptations to the local tropical climate. Traditional Cambodian

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<sup>95</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 12.

<sup>96</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, "Sihanouk's Legacy," February 26, 2013, New Mandala, assessed April 21, 2013, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2013/02/26/sihanouks-legacy/>.

<sup>97</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 102.

<sup>98</sup> Ian Harris, editor, *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (Taylor & Francis, Inc., 2007), 115-117, eBook.

houses were usually raised on columns due to regular flooding in the rainy season. The columns also allowed for open, shaded space for social activities, and created a natural cooling effect. Wall panels, double walls, roofs, and loggias were installed to prevent direct harsh sunlight. In New Khmer Architecture, the emphasis was on blending Angkor (Ancient Cambodian style) with the traditional Cambodian house style. Hence, the VVV- shaped roofs that can be found in many of the buildings built during this time emphasized the grand likeness to the Angkor Temples.

The extensive number of films produced by Sihanouk often featured New Khmer Architecture as well as the more familiar Angkorian settings, as seen in his film *Shadow of Angkor* (*Numerology* is also incorporated into the architectural design, “not as some recipe for aesthetic beauty but as a way of communicating with a higher level of thinking.”

Like Sihanouk, Molyvann felt he had to integrate Cambodian traditions into his work rather than simply follow the lessons of his French masters.

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*Everybody was aware that it was necessary to rediscover our origins, the motivation behind our country's existence and that like any country with an ancient tradition, it should reassert its own personality.*

Vann Molyvann, *La Dépêche du Cambodge*, 1964<sup>99</sup>

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Molyvann's designs became more and more assertive as the years passed since his first arrival back to Cambodia from France. He liberated himself from his French training and the Italian Renaissance, and instead more and more of his work drew inspiration from elements of ancient Khmer and vernacular architecture as well as Japanese traditions and everyday

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<sup>99</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 129.

Cambodians objects such as carrying sticks and straw hats.<sup>100</sup> Molyvann's "best friend," Gérald Hanning also believed that the traditional Cambodian house of wood and thatched roof was perfectly adapted to modern needs, especially in a tropical climate, and the challenge was how to integrate it into a densely populated modern city.<sup>101</sup>

## The Environmentalist

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Before the French colonization, the Khmer tradition was built around the law that people were only allowed to build on water but nowhere on land without the permission of the king.<sup>102</sup> After the establishment of the French colony, the rules were reversed, and instead brought the idea that the best way to build is by filling in wetlands, waterways, lakes, and constructing dykes for earth-bound vehicles and heavy building buildings.<sup>103</sup> When Sihanouk ruled, in a tropical climate with temperatures of 20 degrees Celsius, the best way to protect the body from excess heat, shade and ventilation are all that is necessary.

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*Also we have to take into account the construction and special tradition of the Khmer wooden house, functional in the way its space is organized, with room under the platform of the house built on stilts for work and play to take place in the shade, verandas protected from the rain and oriented to benefit from the dominant wind, elegant roofs in which the loft acts an effective insulation of ventilated air.*

Vann Molyvann<sup>104</sup>

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The vernacular style of building light-weight structures in Cambodia used materials that were readily available such as bamboo, rushes, rattan, wood, tiles and bricks. Characteristics of

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<sup>100</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 208.

<sup>101</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 204-205.

<sup>102</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 113.

<sup>103</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 113.

<sup>104</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 206.

Molyvann's works include, Angkor-inspired plans with moats and buildings aligned along an east-west axis with local materials like brick stone.<sup>105</sup> Another detail that was also very important in building the new infrastructures was the creation of natural ventilation to cool the building.

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*Water and air are in abundance, and instead of fighting against the elements there is a mentality of embracing the climate and making use of the elements.*

Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins<sup>106</sup>

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Although Sihanouk adapted the building constructions to match the environment, there were also three major structural constraints to the development of a Greater Phnom Penh: flooding, water drainage, and geological movement. The city expanded by the construction of dikes which extended away from the colonial center of the city on the banks of Tonle Sap River, and this process of building dikes and the refilling several times would then create a series of concentric arcs on which the major boulevards of the city today run (Preah Sihanouk Boulevard, Monivong Boulevard, Mao Tse Tung Boulevard).<sup>107</sup> During the rainy season, water accumulated along the dikes must be pumped out and discharged into a network of “beng” (ponds) and “prek” (canals) outside the city.<sup>108</sup>

There was a stress on the botanical surroundings, a legacy of French colonial streetscapes, which extended to incorporating suitable plantings into new urban developments. The importance placed on horticulture probably reflected the influence of Madame Dy Phon

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<sup>105</sup> Ross and Collins, ‘New Khmer Architecture,’ 202.

<sup>106</sup> Ross and Collins, ‘New Khmer Architecture,’ 113.

<sup>107</sup> Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, 112-115.

<sup>108</sup> Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, 115.

Pauline, a doctor of biology who had a profound effect on the study and research of botanical species during Sihanouk's rule.

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*In a botanical guide to Phnom Penh published many years later, she [Madame Dy Phon Pauline] and Marie-Alexandrien Martin highlighted the "harmonious placing of plants and vibrant colors" that travelers could admire from the shade of the foliage. "This vegetation that suits the city well certainly contributes to the idea that Phnom Penh is the most beautiful city of Southeast Asia."*

Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins<sup>109</sup>

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Madame Pauline's studies assisted Sihanouk in incorporating environmental designs in the beautification and modernization of Phnom Penh. The city became better known as the 'Paris of the East'.

## The 'Paris of the East'

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With its tree-lined streets, flower-bedecked boulevards and shady riverside parks, Phnom Penh was the most beautiful city of Southeast Asia. In June 1961, Sihanouk met with Phnom Penh Governor Tep Phan, and pushed for development at the Bassac River Front in Phnom Penh, which included plans to develop 24 hectares of reclaimed land with low-cost housing and public buildings that completed the perspective up to the Independence Monument.<sup>110</sup>

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*Our capital must deal with the problem of the urban population. I do not think it necessary to remind you of the social and hygiene problems, the fire risk and the infrastructure and transport problems associated with unplanned development on the periphery of the town. We must begin the construction of low-cost apartment buildings that can be rented or sold to*

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<sup>109</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 7.

<sup>110</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 16.



*average and small-income families. This will no doubt take some time and requires progressive planning and investment.*

Norodom Sihanouk, June 1961<sup>111</sup>

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Under the care of Vladimir Bodiensky, an international team of town planners were led by Gérald Hanning, Lu Ban Hap, and Molyvann to work on the projects by the Bassac River Front. The Sangkum Reastr Niyum Exhibition Hall was build first and inaugurated towards the end of 1961. By 1963, the municipality had built 468 apartments which were included the separate apartments for staff of the National Bank of Cambodia.<sup>112</sup> More apartments were built for the Southeast Games in 1964, which never took place. The river front development also continued with the Preah Suramarit National Theater, which was inaugurated in 1968.<sup>113</sup> Molyvann's design for the National Theater was based on a triangular module inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright, with an "organic design that explodes in the pyramid form of the roof," and this well-ventilated space allowed for seating arrangements for 1,200 people.<sup>114</sup> The theater is reminiscent of a ship steaming down the river.<sup>115</sup>

Cambodia was scheduled to hold the Southeast Asian Games in 1963, and in 1962 construction for the National Sports Complex started. The regional event was cancelled and never took place. The 40-hectare site chosen for the sports complex required major earthworks. As the Prompi Makara district was a wetland area, oxcarts were used in the initial phase. Only after the 1st platform of Earth had been created could mechanical diggers and

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<sup>111</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 16.

<sup>112</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 16-17.

<sup>113</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 16-27.

<sup>114</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 26.

<sup>115</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 26.

bulldozers move in.<sup>116</sup> Molyvann recalled how the first bulldozer gradually sank into the ground without the driver realizing what was happening. Somebody shouted for him to jump out which he did “like a frog” – just in time to see his machine disappear into the mud, left for some archaeologist to discover in the future.<sup>117</sup> The National Sports Complex had three main functions – indoor and outdoor sports facilities, water sports facilities and housing of athletes.<sup>118</sup> On November 12, 1964, Sihanouk inaugurated the new facilities as the Phnom Penh National Sports Complex. An estimation of up to 100,000 people attended the inauguration ceremony, complete with fireworks and other displays.<sup>119</sup>

Sihanouk also inaugurated other facilities donated by foreign governments. Between 1965 and 1968, these included a Chinese cotton mill, a Japanese agriculture center, a Chinese textile factory and a French jute mill.<sup>120</sup> In June, 1956, the Chinese People’s Republic granted Cambodia equipment, construction material, and merchandise allegedly valued at \$22.4 million.<sup>121</sup> Besides the Chinese textile factory, this assistance also was used to build a plywood factory, a cement factory, and a paper mill. Economic assistance from Czechoslovakia included a tractor and automobile plant, and soon afterwards, there were an increasing number of vehicles on the streets.<sup>122</sup> There was a better performance for a sugar refinery, also sponsored by Czechoslovakia, which used locally produced palm sugar. Additionally, a highway linking the

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<sup>116</sup> Ross and Collins, *‘New Khmer Architecture,’* 212-217.

<sup>117</sup> Ross and Collins, *‘New Khmer Architecture,’* 216.

<sup>118</sup> Ross and Collins, *‘New Khmer Architecture,’* 213

<sup>119</sup> Ross and Collins, *‘New Khmer Architecture,’* 212.

<sup>120</sup> Ross and Collins, *‘New Khmer Architecture,’* 50.

<sup>121</sup> Leifer, *The Search for Security*, 7.

<sup>122</sup> Leifer, *The Search for Security*, 7.

Sihanoukville port with the capital was an American benefaction, and dams for hydroelectric power had been financed by the Soviet Union, France, and Yugoslavia.<sup>123</sup>

Most of Cambodia's development was financed by the national budget overseen by Finance Minister Son Sann, also known as the "austere financier" who formulated economic programs under Sihanouk for almost two decades.<sup>124</sup> The National Bank of Cambodia, established in 1954 also played a role in financing Sihanouk's projects. In 1955, there was the launch of a new currency known as the riel to replace the piaster, the Old French colonial currency.<sup>125</sup> Cambodia's economy was predominantly precapitalist, and the agricultural sector consisted mainly of peasant family production in rice paddy and on *cahmcar*.<sup>126</sup>

In their rural environment, the Khmers were conservative villagers who live mainly in simple thatched houses raised on wooden piles. Although limited but rapidly growing urban centers demonstrate the influence of the modern world, the vast majority of the population during this time period (1955-1970) had not yet been deeply affected by the process of modernization. The transistorized radio and the bicycle were perhaps the most common signs of the changing rural modes.<sup>127</sup> The "rhythm of life" was still governed by the cultivation of rice, which was "accomplished chiefly by traditional methods and accompanied by appropriate religious ritual."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Leifer, *The Search for Security*, 7.

<sup>124</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 157.

<sup>125</sup> Ross and Collins, 'New Khmer Architecture,' 157-158.

<sup>126</sup> Kevin McIntyre, "Geography as Destiny: Cities, Villages and Khmer Rouge Orientalism," vol. 38, no.4 of *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, (Cambridge University Press, October 1996): 742, assessed March 24, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179197>.

<sup>127</sup> Leifer, *The Search for Security*, 5.

<sup>128</sup> Leifer, *The Search for Security*, 5.

Just like the legacy he left for future generations of Cambodians, he also imprinted the frameworks of a developing imperial capital. Phnom Penh became the principal city of the country with the greatest population and the strongest urban economy. The attraction of Phnom Penh to foreigners came partially from the chaos nearby. Development took place in a complex political and military context which prevailed during the period, and Sihanouk implicated in every dimension and was without a doubt, its major force. Following Sihanouk's principle of neutrality and the build of a beautiful renewed city, Phnom Penh became not only a stopping point, but a peaceful place of rest, away from the turmoil of the Vietnam War. CNN reporters, TIME magazine journalists, generals, as well as U.S. President John F. Kennedy all came to visit Phnom Penh often.

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*It rose out of the ashes of French Indochina and began straight after independence. It is the result of the collective efforts of the Cambodian people themselves to build a new nation under the guidance of an exceptionally inspired and energetic leader.*

Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins<sup>129</sup>

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Sihanouk promoted a high standard of architecture which also sparked a movement throughout the rest of Southeast Asia. During several visits to Cambodia in the 1960s, first Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew was impressed by the new architecture of Phnom Penh and expressed the desire for Singapore to be developed along similar lines.<sup>130</sup> In a letter to Sihanouk in 1967, Australian Prime Minister Harold Hold said he was “deeply impressed by the architecture, the charm and grace of Phnom Penh and by the ancient grandeur of Angkor” during his visit. “I was also most interested in your vigorous programme for economic

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<sup>129</sup> Ross and Collins, ‘New Khmer Architecture,’ 262.

<sup>130</sup> Ross and Collins, ‘New Khmer Architecture,’ xxiv.

development, with the imaginative and progressive port and town development for Sihanoukville. It was heartening also to observe the contentment and prosperity of the Cambodian people.” Cambodia charmed the World.

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*By our achievements and progress in all fields and by the dynamics of national unity, we have certainly shown to the world that we are not a bastard nation deprived of intelligence, courage and energy – as the enemies of our country and people have often pretended. Despite the criticism and slander of some of our neighbors and their imperialist masters, we have proved our capacity to transform our ancient kingdom into a modern nation.*

Norodom Sihanouk, November 12, 1964<sup>131</sup>

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The boulevards, monuments, government buildings, universities, theatres and sports stadium that he built remain impressive architectural achievements for which Sihanouk will long be remembered for. In the subsequent chapter, we will study how Sihanouk found both personal and national satisfaction in adopting neutrality as a framework for his foreign policy. What was the reason behind his motivation for maintaining neutrality and undertaking building projects? Was it truly for the benefit of the nation or was it mainly due to his desire to control Cambodia?

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<sup>131</sup> Ross and Collins, ‘New Khmer Architecture,’ 212.

# Chapter Three

## The Search for a 'Neutral' Path

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*Our neutrality is not a doctrine. It is a realism, it is an attitude dictated by facts and situation.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, May 1959<sup>132</sup>

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In early 1953, Sihanouk left Cambodia for what is commonly known as his “Royal Crusade for Independence.” Sihanouk toured the Western capitals – Paris, New York, and Montreal – in pursuance to impress upon them the urgency of independence for his country.<sup>133</sup> Sihanouk rejected violence, of external constraints. Aware of, almost to the point of obsession, Sihanouk was troubled with the Khmer people’s numerical inferiority (six million inhabitants, 400,000 Vietnamese and 350,000 Chinese, compared to the fifty million inhabitants in Vietnam), so he deliberately turned his back on centuries of violence and bloody confrontations.<sup>134</sup> On April 26 – July 20, 1954, the Geneva Conference, produced a set of documents, known as the Geneva Accords which established the separation of Vietnam into two zones: a northern zone to be governed by the Viet Minh, and a southern zone to be governed by the State of Vietnam, then headed by former emperor Bảo Đại. Three separate ceasefire accords, ending hostilities in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, were also signed at the conference.

Throughout the 1960s, politics in Southeast Asia became increasingly complicated and violent. A low-level revolt in South Vietnam erupted into the Vietnam War. The Viet Cong expanded the war into the eastern regions of Cambodia.<sup>135</sup> Between growing domestic

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<sup>132</sup> The Statement of Norodom Sihanouk to *Le Monde* on May 19, 1959 quoted in *Cambodia News* (Royal Embassy of Cambodia, New Delhi) July 6, 1959, 6.

<sup>133</sup> Reddi, “A Study of Cambodia's Neutralism,” 197.

<sup>134</sup> Sihanouk, *War and Hope*, xxii; see also Sihanouk, “Cambodia Neutral: The Dictate of Necessity,” 582.

<sup>135</sup> J. D. Coleman, *Incursion*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991) 2.

pressures and the international pressures of the Vietnam War, Sihanouk was set up in an increasingly difficult position.

Squeezed in between two medium-sized nations of the Western bloc and only thinly screened by Laos from the scrutiny of two countries of the Eastern bloc, North Viet Nam and the vast People's Republic of China, Cambodia had to find the best path for his people. "What choice have we but try to maintain an equal balance between the 'blocs'?" stated Sihanouk in the *Foreign Affairs* journal, July 1958.<sup>136</sup> Any pressure from one bloc would be offset by the other resulting in stability of the monarchy as a means of preserving the country's peace and freedom, and in maintaining a perfect "equilibrium." The monarchy and neutralism were interlinked.<sup>137</sup> Sihanouk also emphasized that neutrality had been imposed on to the country by necessity. Neutrality was also spawned from Cambodia's difficulties during the turmoil of Vietnam War, and the way in which it was trying to overcome them.<sup>138</sup>

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*My country, as my destiny, is seventeen centuries old. It has never met such a tragedy as it is facing at present. Perhaps it is going to disappear from the map of the world. I have only one chance of saving it.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, July 1958<sup>139</sup>

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Since Cambodia achieved independence, Sihanouk's 'neutral' policy had always been suited to the national needs. There was reluctance by the Western powers to consult with Sihanouk on decisions affecting Cambodia in a setting of Cold War tensions within Asia. Sihanouk's embrace of a neutral foreign policy is noted in the context of the Bandung Conference in Indonesia. It is possible that at this time in the early 1950s, Sihanouk and his

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<sup>136</sup> Sihanouk, "Cambodia Neutral: The Dictate of Necessity," 583.

<sup>137</sup> Reddi, "A Study of Cambodia's Neutralism," 200.

<sup>138</sup> "Cambodia Neutral: The Dictate of Necessity," 582-583.

<sup>139</sup> Reddi, "A Study of Cambodia's Neutralism," 197.

advisors saw that a foreign policy of neutrality was the least likely to meet with the resistance of those whose cooperation was sought.

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*A neutral policy would not only facilitate unification of diverse parties but would also deprive those who chose to remain in opposition of an important political issue. A policy of alignment, adopted so soon after the struggle for Independence, would almost certainly have placed in the hands of the adversaries a lethal propaganda weapon.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>140</sup>

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Held in April 18–24 of 1955, the Bandung Conference was first large-scale Summit Conference of Asian and African Peoples. The conference awakened the rest of the world to the newly emerged independent countries. The main objective was to find common ground for cooperation among countries with different ideologies, and this was the need of the then international system of states.<sup>141</sup> It signaled the final collapse of colonialism and the emergence of an international force capable of challenging the dominant role of the Western powers in the arena of international politics. China played an important role in the conference and strengthened its relations with other Asian nations. On the other hand, neutrality was not acceptable to the United States (US). In the spirit of the Bandung Conference, Sihanouk expressed neutrality in the Cold War while trying to maintain a political balance between a right-wing military and a growing Communist movement, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

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*In our foreign relations we have favored neutrality, which in the United States is all too often confused with 'neutralism,' although it is fundamentally different. We are neutral in the same way Switzerland and Sweden are neutral—not neutralist like Egypt or Indonesia. Let anyone*

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<sup>140</sup> Roger M. Smith, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), 75-76.

<sup>141</sup> Wiswa Warnapala, "Badung Conference of 1955 and the resurgence of Asia and Africa," Daily News Online, Lake House, last modified 2003, assessed on February 12, 2013, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2005/04/21/fea01.htm>.



*examine our votes in the United Nations; they are not often 'aligned' with those of the bloc of 'neutralist' nations.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, July 1958<sup>142</sup>

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The US involvement in Vietnam began as advisory support for the French. The French attempted to reassert colonial control over Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In late 1955, there was pressure from the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen Dulles, head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to place Cambodia under the protection of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization, but Sihanouk refused.<sup>143</sup> If accepted, this arrangement would go against Cambodia's pledge of neutrality. John Foster Dulles insisted that neutralism was 'dangerous and immoral.'<sup>144</sup> US Ambassador and experienced CIA agent, Robert McClintock harped on the same stale themes as had the brothers Dulles:

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*The Chinese intended to gobble us up... The US Congress would withhold economic aid from countries steering a neutral course... No nation could conceivably remain neutral in the struggle against world communism... Not to be with the US in this crusade was to be against her... Cambodia cannot be a Switzerland in Asia. You cannot be neutral. You have to choose between the free world and the communist camp.*

Robert McClintock, 1958<sup>145</sup>

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In March 1956, Sihanouk resigned as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, and justified his action at a press conference held at Kampot on the southern coast. During this time, the US was continuing their military intrusions into Cambodia and there were also open threats of 'defensive manners' by South Vietnam and Thailand, with scarcely veiled support from the US.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Sihanouk, "Cambodia Neutral: The Dictate of Necessity," 583.

<sup>143</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 75.

<sup>144</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 76.

<sup>145</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 76.

<sup>146</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 84.

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*I realized that my resignation will be considered a moral victory by the Americans, and I hope they will now be satisfied. They, who have so often promised to defend the liberties of small countries, have just shown their real face in Cambodia. It is not edifying. Let our compatriots rest assured of one thing, however: we will not permit anyone to trample on our neutrality or on our sovereignty. We will not retreat a single step. We have victoriously rebuffed threats of this sort before – we shall do so again.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>147</sup>

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Acutely conscious of Cambodia's small size and lack of material power, the prince found both personal and national satisfaction in adopting neutrality as a framework for his foreign policy, seeing it as an act of defiance.<sup>148</sup> Declaring Cambodia's neutrality in the face of American pressure gave him a measure of satisfaction that went beyond the policy implications of his stance. "Not only was the policy right, in his eyes, but the fact that it offended America added spice to the experience of adopting it. To tweak the giant's nose and then enjoy the spectacle of his having to contain his anger was exhilarating."<sup>149</sup>

As the American war against Vietnam intensified, so too did the pressure on Sihanouk to choose sides. In a delicate and complex balancing act, Sihanouk and the Cambodian government allowed Vietnamese troops to use part of its territory for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which fed troops and supplies into South Vietnam. South Vietnamese security forces repeatedly violated the Cambodian border while pursuing the Viet-Cong, and these intrusions frequently had tragic consequences for Cambodia's civilian population.<sup>150</sup>

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*I have also been criticized for opening Kampuchea's doors to the Vietnamese during the 1960s, even to the 'most dangerous Yuons,' meaning the Vietminh or North Vietnamese Communists... Doing*

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<sup>147</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 84.

<sup>148</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 96.

<sup>149</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 96.

<sup>150</sup> Leifer, *The Search for Security*, 99.

*everything possible to help a neighbor threatened by imperialism was a duty the kingdom of Cambodia could not shrink.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>151</sup>

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In 1956, Cambodia's Fourth National Congress approved a formal and permanent Neutrality Act. Hou Youn, of the Committee in Defense of Neutrality, stated that "if we are sincere in our neutrality, other powers should respect this. But if the US does not, and stops its aid, we have powerful friends to whom we can turn for help."<sup>152</sup> It was unanimously decreed that the National Assembly draft a law<sup>153</sup> which includes the following points:

- 1. Cambodia is a neutral country.**
- 2. Cambodia abstains from military or ideological alliance with other countries.**
- 3. Cambodia will not commit aggression against other countries, but in case she is the victim of aggression, she reserves the right:**
  - **Firstly, to take up arms in self-defiance.**
  - **Secondly, to appeal to the United Nations for help.**
  - **Thirdly, to appeal for aid to a friendly power capable of crushing the aggressor.**

This act was later incorporated into Cambodia's constitution. Sihanouk believed that the "neutrality Act will form a cornerstone of our foreign policy after victory."<sup>154</sup> In 1958, the army numbered only 25,000 men. The army was of vital importance to the security of the country. The US removed a heavy burden on the national budget by undertaking to meet the cost of maintaining and equipping the Cambodian army, as well as assisting the country in the

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<sup>151</sup> Sihanouk, *War and Hope*, 58.

<sup>152</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 89.

<sup>153</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 89-90.

<sup>154</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 90.

development of irrigation and education through the United States Operation Mission.<sup>155</sup> China aided in the build of four factories; the French helped Cambodia to increase national production through the development of irrigation and agriculture co-operation, and the USSR built a 500-bed hospital.<sup>156</sup> Cambodia's desire to reconstruct its economy with the help of economic and other aid from both the Cold War blocs safeguarded the nation's freedom against external pressure. It was estimated that about 90 percent of the planned expenditure was met by foreign aid.<sup>157</sup>

The Bandung Conference in 1955 paved the way for the Non-Aligned movement (NAM) and the first Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries in Belgrade in 1961. NAM wanted to be neutral between the Western and Eastern blocs in the cold war.

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*As for such socialist countries as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, we support them politically and diplomatically without reservation. But we cannot support certain among them in their efforts to neocolonialise Cambodia and turn it into a satellite by using Khmer Reds as their Trojan horse.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, September 1967.<sup>158</sup>

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The principal reasons for Sihanouk's rejection in 1963 of US aid were due to the humiliating conditions incompatible with Cambodia's independence and non-alignment which went with this Aid. For example, when the National Defense lacked the fighter-planes and other modern weapons Cambodia would not have had the right to receive them from the

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<sup>155</sup> Reddi, "A Study of Cambodia's Neutralism," 201.

<sup>156</sup> Reddi, "A Study of Cambodia's Neutralism," 201-202.

<sup>157</sup> "Economics Developments in Cambodia," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (April 3, 1958), 430-431.

<sup>158</sup> Norodom Sihanouk, *Statements by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, 1965-1973*, pamphlet, 1.

Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China.<sup>159</sup> According to Sihanouk, The US Economic Aid was "designed so as to thrust the economy irreversibly into the system called 'liberal' which, as one can still see in Thailand or in South Vietnam, accentuates social injustice and in no way corresponds to the necessities of an underdeveloped country."<sup>160</sup> The US Economic Aid refused to aid the Khmer State to create State-controlled industries and sought only to develop a market for imported consumer goods which suited only the privileged classes in Cambodian society. There was also evidence of the military and economic aid corrupting the heads of the Army and Civil Administration to a fantastic degree.

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*The Army has never forgiven me for refusing to encourage US imports and has rushed to profit from them in 1970 to the extent of a catastrophic war and unspeakable sufferings on the part of the people. Finally, this rejection in 1963 came about as a result of a series of plots hatched by certain 'not-so-quiet' Americans against my parents and myself aimed at suppressing or overthrowing us and as a result of a series of murderous and bloody incursions by American, Saigonese and so-called Free-Khmers armed forces directed against neutral Cambodia.*

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, February 1971<sup>161</sup>

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On November 19, 1963, Sihanouk appeared before a hastily convened national congress of the Sangkum to explain his economic decisions and the rejection of the US aid. He also used to opportunity to bring before the crowd two Khmer Serei rebels, representatives of the dissidents linked to his old enemy Song Ngoc Thanh, and displayed them in cages.<sup>162</sup> One rebel confessed and admitted that Thanh was supported by the US, and was immediately released, while the other remained mute. That other rebel was cowered before the abuse of the crowd,

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<sup>159</sup> Norodom Sihanouk, *Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia speaks: January-February 1971*, exclusive Interviews from the *New Zealand Monthly Review* (February 1971), *The Great Speckled Bird* (U.S.A, January 1971), and *The Indian Express*, (January 28-29, 1971), pamphlet, 1-2.

<sup>160</sup> Sihanouk, *Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia speaks*, 2.

<sup>161</sup> Sihanouk, *Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia speaks*, 2.

<sup>162</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 162.

and condemned shortly after. In early 1964, his execution was captured on film at Sihanouk's order and shown in cinemas throughout Cambodia.<sup>163</sup>

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*I planned to end once and for all the monopoly of US influence in our country. I would turn to the socialist world for help. The Third point in Cambodia's relations with the outside world. Washington would have to eat the bitter fruits of trying to push a small country too brutally in a direction which it did not want to take. What could have been a pro-Western neutrality would be a purer form of neutrality as between East and West.*

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Prince Norodom Sihanouk<sup>164</sup>

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Cambodia's neutrality was intended to provide for its country security in the Cold War by permitting it to seek an appropriate counter to an external threat. The respect for monarchy, which was embedded in the national consciousness, was interlinked with Sihanouk's search for a 'neutral' path. Sihanouk's decision to make neutrality as a law stands as a difference amongst other nations that practiced neutralism as well. While Cambodia would not enter into any military and political alliance with any power, Sihanouk reserved the right to appeal to the United Nations and to some friendly power in case of aggression on Cambodia's territory.<sup>165</sup> Sihanouk's style of diplomacy reflected his personal as well as national ambition. He envisaged neutrality as a policy that would permit flexible response to any dramatic change in circumstances.<sup>166</sup>

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*Like a tightrope artist, who must constantly balance himself upon a swaying rope, so did and does Sihanouk wakes up each day to adjust to changing situation.*

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<sup>163</sup> Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 162.

<sup>164</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 85.

<sup>165</sup> Reddi, "A Study of Cambodia's Neutralism," 205.

<sup>166</sup> Leifer, *The Search for Security*, 120.

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<sup>167</sup> Norodom Sihanouk and Bernard Krisher, *Sihanouk Reminisces: World Leaders I have Known*, edited by Harrauld Ricci, (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1990), 26.

# Conclusion

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Sihanouk was a great leader who was fueled by his desire to lift Cambodia up to stand on its own two feet. He gave a sense of hope to Cambodians, as well as modernized a small nation. Sihanouk's commitment to remaining neutral and the Cambodians immense loyalty to the Father-Prince, allowed Cambodia to build so quickly in a short amount of time, and gained much attention and popularity from the rest of the world.

During French Colonial rule, the French government mistakenly believed that Sihanouk would be compliant. Many Cambodians did not know much about him, before he first elevated power in 1941. Hardly any would have predicted that one day he would be seen as the country's dominant political figure. Attaining the throne was a surprise for Sihanouk, says his nephew, Prince Sisowath Thomico, who was close to Sihanouk for much of his life.

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*He always wanted to be a literature professor. He wanted to teach French, Latin, Greek because he loved those topics. He's been thrown in the political arena by the French, and he couldn't do anything else except assume his responsibilities as the king of Cambodia. But he never wanted to become king.*

Prince Sisowath Thomico, January 2013<sup>168</sup>

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In the space of eight years from 1953 to 1963, Cambodia had moved forward from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, and on to an original form of guided democracy via the National Congress of Sangkum. "The role of the monarch had been reduced at my initiative – to a symbolic one," stated Sihanouk.<sup>169</sup> Hence,

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<sup>168</sup> Robert Carmichael, "Cambodia Prepares for Former King's Cremation," *Voice of America*, January 31, 2013, assessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.voanews.com/content/cambodia-prepares-for-cremation-of-former-king-sihanouk/1594332.html>.

<sup>169</sup> Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA*, 164-165.



the power of decision was in the hands of the Prime Minister and his cabinet, reinforced by the direct participation of the people. The system worked smoothly for the next few years, before the topple of Sihanouk's monarchy in 1970. His frequent public appearances, Sihanouk seemed to relish working alongside rural villagers on various public works projects, and was able to form a close bond between himself as a person and the country he ruled.<sup>170</sup>

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*He was an insomniac who could call meetings at three o'clock in the morning. He had tremendous energy, but the problem was that his energy just led him eventually to exhaustion. Exhaustion with the problems of Cambodia, and straightforward physical exhaustion.*

Milton Osborne, February 2013<sup>171</sup>

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The days leading to his cremation, Prince Thomico said he was so impressed by the effort the government had made:

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*It never happened before. It did not happen for King Norodom, for King Sisowath, for King Monivong or even for King Suramarit, who was the father for King Sihanouk. It did not happen. We did not have that huge crowd and that huge organization.*

Prince Sisowath Thomico, January 2013<sup>172</sup>

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Today, as investment continues to flood into Phnom Penh, swathes of colonial buildings and the work of Molyvann and the New Khmer ensemble have been ripped down, communes evicted from their lands and soaring skyscrapers built in their place.

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*I feel extremely sad... It's a systeme totalitaire! There is no hope left for my buildings. I believe most of them will go. I cannot elaborate any more: I am sick of it. What will it do?*

Vann Vann Molyvann, January 2013<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> AFP, "Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's mercurial ex-king."

<sup>171</sup> Agence France-Presse (AFP), "Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's mercurial ex-king." *GlobalPost*, February 4, 2013, assessed February 21, 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/130204/norodom-sihanouk-cambodias-mercurial-ex-king>.

<sup>172</sup> Carmichael, "Cambodia Prepares for Former King's Cremation."

Phnom Penh must become the central motor for the emerging non agriculture economy. Molyvann believes that there are a number of measures that must be taken to “facilitate the growth of industry and commerce, to eliminate existing constraints, and to gradually assure that dysfunctional urban economies cease to compromise the growth rate of the economy.”<sup>174</sup> At the same time, the economy of secondary cities has to be stimulated in order for these cities to be able to play a greater role in their respective regions.<sup>175</sup>

Sihanouk has fought for his people and had had strong good intentions. It was through his desires to control the monarchy, his pride for his country, and his love of his people that stimulated such an immense growth in Cambodia internally and externally. He gave the young people hope and pride in their country. With the push and pull of powers during the Vietnam War period, Sihanouk guided Cambodia in maintaining a ‘neutral’ path, and did his best to protect Cambodians. He kept on fighting for the future of Cambodia.

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*It is very important for me to stay in my country, in the house of my history. [The late King Father] Sihanouk and I are the same here – we’ve both come back for the finale, to be cremated.*

Vann Molyvann, January 2013<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Knox, “Vann Molyvann: My Legacy Will Disappear.”

<sup>174</sup> Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, 25-26.

<sup>175</sup> Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities*, 25-26.

<sup>176</sup> Knox, “Vann Molyvann: My Legacy Will Disappear.”

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