CAMBODIA UNDER KING SIHANOUK, 1954-70

Sihanouk continues to be one of the most controversial figures in Southeast Asia's turbulent, and often tragic, post-war history. Admirers view him as one of the country's great patriots, whose insistence on strict neutrality kept Cambodia out of the maelstrom of war and out of the revolution in neighbouring Vietnam for more than fifteen years before he was betrayed by his close associate, Lon Nol. Critics attack him for his vanity, eccentricities, and intolerance of any political views different from his own. One such critic, Michael Vickery, asserts that beneath the neutralist rhetoric Sihanouk presided over a regime that was oppressively reactionary and, in some instances, as violent in its suppression of political opposition as the Khmer Rouge. According to Vickery, the royal armed forces under Lon Nol slaughtered women and children in pro-Khmer Issarak regions of Battambang in 1954 using methods that were later to become routine under Pol Pot. Another critical observer, Milton E. Osborne, writing as an Australian expatriate in Phnom Penh during the late 1960s, describes the Sihanouk years in terms of unbridled greed and corruption, of a foreign policy inspired more by opportunism than by the desire to preserve national independence, of an economy and a political system that were rapidly coming apart, and of the prince's obsession with making outrageously mediocre films--one of which starred himself and his wife, Princess Monique. Sihanouk was all of these things--patriot, neutralist, embodiment of the nation's destiny, eccentric, rigid defender of the status quo, and promoter of the worst sort of patron-client politics. He believed that he single-handedly had won Cambodia's independence from the French. The contributions of other nationalists, such as Son Ngoc Thanh and the Viet Minh, were conveniently forgotten. Sihanouk also believed he had the right to run the state in a manner not very different from that of the ancient Khmer kings--that is, as an extension of his household. Unlike the ancient "god-kings," however, he established genuine rapport with ordinary Cambodians. He made frequent, often impromptu, trips throughout the country, visiting isolated villages, chatting with peasants, receiving petitions, passing out gifts, and scolding officials for mismanagement.

According to British author and journalist William Shawcross, Sihanouk was able to create a "unique brand of personal populism." To ordinary Cambodians, his eccentricities, volatility, short temper, sexual escapades, and artistic flights of fancy were an expression of royal charisma rather than an occasion for scandal. Sihanouk's delight in making life difficult for foreign diplomats and journalists, moreover, amused his subjects. Ultimately, the eccentric humanity of Sihanouk was to contrast poignantly with the random brutality of his Khmer Rouge successors.
The Geneva Conference

Although Cambodia had achieved independence by late 1953, its military situation remained unsettled. Noncommunist factions of the Khmer Issarak had joined the government, but communist Viet Minh activities increased at the very time French Union force were stretched thin elsewhere.

In April 1954, several Viet Minh battalions crossed the border into Cambodia. Royalist forces engaged them but could not force their complete withdrawal. In part, the communists were attempting to strengthen their bargaining position at the Geneva Conference that had been scheduled to begin in late April.

The Geneva Conference was attended by representatives of Cambodia, North Vietnam, the Associated State of Vietnam (the predecessor of the Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam), Laos, the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, France, Britain, and the United States. One goal of the conference was to restore a lasting peace in Indochina. The discussions on Indochina began on May 8, 1954. The North Vietnamese attempted to get representation for the resistance government that had been established in the south, but failed. On July 21, 1954, the conference reached an agreement calling for a cessation of hostilities in Indochina. With respect to Cambodia, the agreement stipulated that all Viet Minh military forces be withdrawn within ninety days and that Cambodian resistance forces be demobilized within thirty days. In a separate agreement signed by the Cambodian representative, the French and the Viet Minh agreed to withdraw all forces from Cambodian soil by October 1954.

In exchange for the withdrawal of Viet Minh forces, the communist representatives in Geneva wanted full neutrality for Cambodia and for Laos that would prevent the basing of United States military forces in these countries. On the eve of the conference's conclusion, however, the Cambodian representative, Sam Sary, insisted that, if Cambodia were to be genuinely independent, it must not be prohibited from seeking whatever military assistance it desired (Cambodia had earlier appealed to Washington for military aid). The conference accepted this point over North Vietnam's strenuous objections. In the final agreement, Cambodia accepted a watered-down neutrality, vowing not to join any military alliance "not in conformity with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations" or to allow the basing of foreign military forces on its territory "as long as its security is not threatened."

The conference agreement established the International Control Commission (officially called the International Commission for Supervision and Control) in all the Indochinese countries. Made up of representatives from Canada, Poland, and India, it supervised the cease-fire, the withdrawal of foreign troops, the release of prisoners of war, and overall compliance with the terms of the agreement. The French and most of the Viet Minh forces were withdrawn on schedule in October 1954.
Domestic Developments
The Geneva agreement also stipulated that general elections should be held in Cambodia during 1955 and that the International Control Commission should monitor them to ensure fairness. Sihanouk was more determined than ever to defeat the Democrats (who, on the basis of their past record, were expected to win the election). The king attempted unsuccessfully to have the constitution amended.

On March 2, 1955, he announced his abdication in favour of his father, Norodom Suramarit. Assuming the title of samdech (prince), Sihanouk explained that this action was necessary in order to give him a free hand to engage in politics.

To challenge the Democrats, Prince Sihanouk established his own political machine, the oddly named Sangkum Reasr Niyum (Popular Socialist Community), commonly referred to as the Sangkum. The name is odd because its most important components were right-wing parties that were virulently anticommunist. The Sangkum's emergence in early 1955 unified most right-wing groups under the prince's auspices. In the September election, Sihanouk's new party decisively defeated the Democrats, the Khmer Independence Party of Son Ngoc Thanh, and the leftist Pracheachon (Citizens') Party, winning 83 percent of the vote and all of the seats in the National Assembly.

Khmer nationalism, loyalty to the monarch, struggle against injustice and corruption, and protection of the Buddhist religion were major themes in Sangkum ideology. The party adopted a particularly conservative interpretation of Buddhism, common in the Theravada countries of Southeast Asia, that the social and economic inequalities among people were legitimate because of the workings of karma. For the poorer classes, virtuous and obedient conduct opened up the possibility of being born into a higher station in a future life. The appeal to religion won the allegiance of the country's many Buddhist priests, who were a particularly influential group in rural villages.

As the 1960s began, organized political opposition to Sihanouk and the Sangkum virtually had disappeared. According to Vickery, the Democratic Party disbanded in 1957 after its leaders--who had been beaten by soldiers--requested the privilege of joining the Sangkum. Despite its defense of the status quo, especially the interests of rural elites, the Sangkum was not an exclusively right-wing organization.
Sihanouk included a number of leftists in his party and government. Among these were future leaders of the Khmer Rouge. Hu Nim and Hou Yuon served in several ministries between 1958 and 1963, and Khieu Samphan served briefly as secretary of state for commerce in 1963.

Sihanouk's attitude toward the left was paradoxical. He often declared that if he had not been a prince, he would have become a revolutionary. Sihanouk's chronic suspicion of United States intentions in the region, his perception of revolutionary China as Cambodia's most valuable ally, his respect for such prominent and capable leftists as Hou, Hu, and Khieu, and his vague notions of "royal socialism" all impelled him to experiment with socialist policies. In 1963 the prince announced the nationalization of banking, foreign trade, and insurance as a means of reducing foreign control of the economy. In 1964 a state trading company, the National Export-Import Corporation, was established to handle foreign commerce. The declared purposes of nationalization were to give Khmer nationals, rather than Chinese or Vietnamese, a greater role in the nation's trade, to eliminate middlemen and to conserve foreign exchange through the limiting of unnecessary luxury imports. As a result of this policy, foreign investment quickly disappeared, and a kind of "crony socialism" emerged somewhat similar to the "crony capitalism" that evolved in the Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos. Lucrative state monopolies were parcelled out to Sihanouk's most loyal retainers, who "milked" them for cash.

Sihanouk was headed steadily for a collision with the right. To counter charges of one-man rule, the prince declared that he would relinquish control of candidate selection and would permit more than one Sangkum candidate to run for each seat in the September 1966 National Assembly election. The returns showed a surprising upsurge in the conservative vote at the expense of more moderate and left-wing elements, although Hou, Hu, and Khieu were re-elected by their constituencies. General Lon Nol became prime minister.

Out of concern that the right wing might cause an irreparable split within the Sangkum and might challenge his domination of the political system, Sihanouk set up a "counter government" (like the British "shadow cabinet") packed with his most loyal personal followers and with leading leftists, hoping that it would exert a restraining influence on Lon Nol. Leftists accused the general of being groomed by Western intelligence agencies to lead a bloody anticommunist coup d'état similar to that of General Soeharto in Indonesia. Injured in an automobile accident, Lon Nol resigned in April 1967.

Sihanouk replaced him with a trusted centrist, Son Sann. This was the twenty-third successive Sangkum cabinet and government to have been appointed by Sihanouk since the party was formed in 1955.

**Nonaligned Foreign Policy**

Sihanouk's nonaligned foreign policy, which emerged in the months following the Geneva Conference, cannot be understood without reference to Cambodia's past history of foreign subjugation and its very uncertain prospects for survival as the war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam intensified. Soon after the 1954 Geneva Conference, Sihanouk expressed some interest in integrating Cambodia into the framework of
the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which included Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam within the "treaty area," although none of these states was a signatory.

But meetings in late 1954 with India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Burma's Premier U Nu made him receptive to the appeal of nonalignment. Moreover, the prince was somewhat uneasy about a United States-dominated alliance that included one old enemy, Thailand, and encompassed another, South Vietnam, each of which offered sanctuary to anti-Sihanouk dissidents.

At the Bandung Conference in April 1955, Sihanouk held private meetings with Premier Zhou Enlai of China and Foreign Minister Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam. Both assured him that their countries would respect Cambodia's independence and territorial integrity. His experience with the French, first as a client, then as the self-proclaimed leader of the "royal crusade for independence," apparently led him to conclude that the United States, like France, would eventually be forced to leave Southeast Asia. From this perspective, the Western presence in Indochina was only a temporary interruption of the dynamics of the region--continued Vietnamese (and perhaps even Thai) expansion at Cambodia's expense. Accommodation with North Vietnam and friendly ties with China during the late 1950s and the 1960s were tactics designed to counteract these dynamics. China accepted Sihanouk's overtures and became a valuable counterweight to growing Vietnamese and Thai pressure on Cambodia.

Cambodia's relations with China were based on mutual interests. Sihanouk hoped that China would restrain the Vietnamese and the Thai from acting to Cambodia's detriment. The Chinese, in turn, viewed Cambodia's nonalignment as vital in order to prevent the encirclement of their country by the United States and its allies. When Premier Zhou Enlai visited Phnom Penh in 1956, he asked the country's Chinese minority, numbering about 300,000, to cooperate in Cambodia's development, to stay out of politics, and to consider adopting Cambodian citizenship. This gesture helped to resolve a sensitive issue--the loyalty of Cambodian Chinese--that had troubled the relationship between Phnom Penh and Beijing.
In 1960 the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship and Nonaggression. After the Sino-Soviet rift Sihanouk's ardent friendship with China contributed to generally cooler ties with Moscow.

China was not the only large power to which Sihanouk looked for patronage, however. Cambodia's quest for security and nation-building assistance impelled the prince to search beyond Asia and to accept help from all donors as long as there was no impingement upon his country's sovereignty. With this end in mind, Sihanouk turned to the United States in 1955 and negotiated a military aid agreement that secured funds and equipment for the Royal Khmer Armed Forces (Forces Armées Royales Khamères--FARK). A United States Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was established in Phnom Penh to supervise the delivery and the use of equipment that began to arrive from the United States. By the early 1960s, aid from Washington constituted 30 percent of Cambodia's defense budget and 14 percent of total budget inflows.

Relations with the United States, however, proved to be stormy. United States officials both in Washington and in Phnom Penh frequently underestimated the prince and considered him to be an erratic figure with minimal understanding of the threat posed by Asian communism. Sihanouk easily reciprocated this mistrust because several developments aroused his suspicion of United States intentions toward his country.

One of these developments was the growing United States influence within the Cambodian armed forces. The processing of equipment deliveries and the training of Cambodian personnel had forged close ties between United States military advisers and their Cambodian counterparts. Military officers of both nations also shared apprehensions about the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Sihanouk considered FARK to be Washington's most powerful constituency in his country. The prince also feared that a number of high-ranking, rightist FARK officers led by Lon Nol were becoming too powerful and that, by association with these officers, United States influence in Cambodia was becoming too deeply rooted.

A second development included the repetition of overflights by United States and South Vietnamese military aircraft within Cambodian airspace and border incursions by South Vietnamese troops in hot pursuit of Viet Cong insurgents who crossed into Cambodian territory when military pressure upon them became too sustained. As the early 1960s
wore on, this increasingly sensitive issue contributed to the deterioration of relations between Phnom Penh and Washington.

A third development was Sihanouk's own belief that he had been targeted by United States intelligence agencies for replacement by a more pro-Western leader. Evidence to support this suspicion came to light in 1959 when the government discovered a plot to overthrow Sihanouk. The conspiracy involved several Khmer leaders suspected of American connections. Among them were Sam Sary, a leader of right-wing Khmer Serei troops in South Vietnam; Son Ngoc Thanh, the early nationalist leader once exiled into Thailand; and Dap Chhuon, the military governor of Siemreab Province. Another alleged plot involved Dap Chhuon's establishment of a "free" state that would have included Siemreab Province and Kampong Thum (Kampong Thom) Province and the southern areas of Laos that were controlled by the rightist Laotian prince, Boun Oum.

![Boun Oum](image1)
![Ho Chi Minh](image2)
![Ngo Dinh Diem](image3)

These developments, magnified by Sihanouk's abiding suspicions, eventually undermined Phnom Penh's relations with Washington. In November 1963, the prince charged that the United States was continuing to support the subversive activities of the Khmer Serei in Thailand and in South Vietnam, and he announced the immediate termination of Washington's aid program to Cambodia. Relations continued to deteriorate, and the final break came in May 1965 amid increasing indications of airspace violations by South Vietnamese and by United States aircraft and of ground fighting between Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops and Viet Cong insurgents in the Cambodian border areas.

In the meantime, Cambodia's relations with North Vietnam and with South Vietnam, as well as the rupture with Washington, reflected Sihanouk's efforts to adjust to geopolitical realities in Southeast Asia and to keep his country out of the escalating conflict in neighbouring South Vietnam. In the early to mid-1960s, this effort required a tilt toward Hanoi because the government in Saigon tottered on the brink of anarchy. In the cities, the administration of Ngo Dinh Diem and the military regimes that succeeded it had become increasingly ineffectual and unstable, while in the countryside the government forces were steadily losing ground to the Hanoi-backed insurgents. To observers in Phnom Penh, South Vietnam's short-term viability was seriously in doubt, and this compelled a new tack in Cambodian foreign policy. First, Cambodia severed diplomatic ties with Saigon in August 1963. The following March, Sihanouk announced plans to establish diplomatic relations with North Vietnam and to negotiate a border settlement directly with Hanoi. These plans were not implemented quickly, however, because the North Vietnamese told the prince that any problem concerning Cambodia's border with South Vietnam would have to be negotiated directly with the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFLSVN). Cambodia opened border talks with the front in mid-1966, and the latter recognized the inviolability of Cambodia's borders a year later. North Vietnam quickly followed suit. Cambodia was the first foreign government to recognize the NFLSVN's Provisional Revolutionary Government after it was established in June 1969. Sihanouk was the only foreign head of state to attend the funeral of Ho Chi Minh, North Vietnam's deceased leader, in Hanoi three months later.
In the late 1960s, while preserving relations with China and with North Vietnam, Sihanouk sought to restore a measure of equilibrium by improving Cambodia's ties with the West. This shift in course by the prince represented another adjustment to prevailing conditions in Southeast Asia. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces were increasing their use of sanctuaries in Cambodia, which also served as the southern terminus of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, their logistical resupply route originating in North Vietnam. Cambodian neutrality in the conflict thus was eroding, and China, preoccupied with its Cultural Revolution, did not intercede with Hanoi. On Cambodia's eastern border, South Vietnam, surprisingly, had not collapsed, even in the face of the communist Tet Offensive in 1968, and President Nguyen Van Thieu's government was bringing a measure of stability to the war-ravaged country. As the government in Phnom Penh began to feel keenly the loss of economic and military aid from the United States, which had totaled about US$400 million between 1955 and 1963, it began to have second thoughts about the rupture with Washington. The unavailability of American equipment and spare parts was exacerbated by the poor quality and the small numbers of Soviet, Chinese, and French substitutes.

In late 1967 and in early 1968, Sihanouk signalled that he would raise no objection to hot pursuit of communist forces by South Vietnamese or by United States troops into Cambodian territory. Washington, in the meantime, accepted the recommendation of the United States Military Assistance Command--Vietnam (MACV) and, beginning in March 1969, ordered a series of airstrikes (dubbed the Menu series) against Cambodian sanctuaries used by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. Whether or not these bombing missions were authorized aroused considerable controversy, and assertions by the Nixon administration that Sihanouk had "allowed" or even "encouraged" them were disputed by critics such as British journalist William Shawcross. On a diplomatic level, however, the Menu airstrikes did not impede bilateral relations from moving forward. In April 1969, Nixon sent a note to the prince affirming that the United States recognized and respected "the sovereignty, neutrality and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Cambodia with its present frontiers." Shortly thereafter, in June 1969, full diplomatic relations were restored between Phnom Penh and Washington.