

THE WAR OF NATIONAL LIBERATION IN KAMPUCHEA, 1954-1970

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I. Background

On March 23, 1970, Prince Sihanouk in Peking formally called upon Cambodians to wage a war of national liberation against the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak regime. He was merely legitimating a movement which had rocked Cambodian politics since the dismantling of French colonialism in 1953, transforming the various movements in Cambodia—from xenophobic nationalism to anti-French rule—into a single, all encompassing revolutionary struggle with an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal orientation. Hence, the March 23 general call to armed struggle was the culmination of the long history of protracted struggle waged by the Khmer Vietminhs against the Japanese occupation forces in World War II, which, in the words of V. M. Reddi, provided a “fillip to Cambodian nationalism.”¹ When Japan occupied the southern parts of Indochina in 1941, anti-western sentiment was generated by the frenzied propagation of such slogans as “Asia for Asians” and “the emancipation of the People of Greater East Asia.” Japanese pro-Asian propaganda reached its peak in the face massive Allied retaliation. Japan was forced to modify its master plan for the control of Cambodia, and it become its overriding concern to win over the Cambodian nationalists before the return of the Allies. Under Japanese pressure, King Norodom Sihanouk proclaimed on March 13, 1945 the independence of Cambodia and abrogated the Protectorate treaties of 1863 and 1884.² Then the Japanese transferred the departments of Cambodian civil administration, except finance and budget, into Cambodian hands, created a Cambodian Cabinet on March 18, released political prisoners who had been incarcerated by the French colonial administration during the 1942 demonstration, and allowed the revival of the *Nagaravatta* newspaper.

Although the transfer of power was nominal by the end of July, 1945, the Cambodians took control of the civil administration. The Cambodian intellectuals, particularly, relished the first fruits of self-government. Ironically enough, it was during

¹ V.M. Reddi, *A History of the Cambodian Independence Movement, 1935-1955* (New Delhi: Sri Venkateswara University Press, 1970), p. 96.

² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

this last phase of the Japanese occupation that the Cambodians were impelled into nationalism but they would not be nationalistic enough to undermine French colonial interests in Cambodia.

When the French reoccupied Cambodia, however, the political climate had definitely changed. Popular sentiment strongly favored French recognition of Cambodia independence, a concession the French was hardly in a position to grant. World War II left France in the throes of economic bankruptcy, and French colonial domination of the Indochinese peninsula was an exigency to be met at all cost.

Cambodian nationalism which had received such a powerful impetus from the Japanese proved too formidable an obstacle for the restoration of the French pre-war position in Cambodia. The rank and file of the Cambodian nationalists wanted to preserve their "newly enjoyed" independence. This was particularly true of the radical nationalists, the Khmer Vietminh. Largely inspired by Marxist ideology, they were vehemently opposed to the return of French colonialism. Even the more moderate among the younger nationalists as well as the Cambodian intellectuals, private and public employees shared the anti-French look, a sentiment inspired by such nationalists as Son Ngoc Thanh, Pach Chhoeun, Huy Kanthol, and others.³

The moderates were strongly nationalistic, though they were not Marxists. Although not *ipso facto* anti-monarchical, they were extremely critical of the king's apparent alignment with the French. For instance, the more militant moderates, the Khmer *Issarak*, accused the Monarch of being too subservient to the French. Since the moderates also wanted to regain Cambodian independence, they went so far as to join hands with the Vietminhs, siding with the supporters of King Sihanouk only when the Vietminhs tried to dominate the independence movement. In the meantime, the supporters of King Sihanouk had succeeded in gaining a large measure of political autonomy for the country.

King Sihanouk and the members of the royal family favored the conservative nationalists. In general, they identified patriotism with their particular interests. For their own self-preservation, that is, to protect themselves from internal dissension as well as from foreign engulfment, especially by its predatory neighbors, Thailand and Annam—they would therefore allow the French to return.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

However, the conservative cause was eclipsed by the unrelenting attitude against French colonialism expressed by Son Ngoc Thanh, the undisputed leader of the moderates who was both Prime Minister and Minister for External Affairs of the Japanese sponsored Cambodian Cabinet.⁴ Upon the withdrawal of the Japanese from Indochinese territory, he declared that his government was determined to resist the re-imposition of French colonialism in Cambodia.⁵ On September 6, 1945, he issued a proclamation to the effect that beyond normal courtesies to the French on an individual-to-individual basis "there does not exist any political relation between France and Cambodia."⁶ He organized a plebiscite on September 12, which registered a "unanimous vote" for the country's immediate independence.⁷ Supported by the Cambodian people's mandate, Son Ngoc Thanh and his associates in the Cabinet swore to undertake sacrifices, including laying down their lives, in defense of the Monarchy and in the name of independence.⁸

Son Ngoc Thanh went so far as to encourage fraternal relations between the Vietminhs and Cambodians, two traditionally hostile peoples, to enlist support for the Cambodian position before the French returned. The elites, however, were not convinced about the desirability of Son Ngoc Thanh's proposed alliance with the Vietminhs in support of Cambodia's struggle to retain its independence. Even his colleagues in the Cabinet, e.g., Kniek Tioulong, Minister for Interior) were hesitant in this regard. Moreover, the conservatives and the moderates feared that the growing personal influence of Son Ngoc Thanh might upset their position in the country's power structure.

On October 10, 1945, the French, British and the Indian troops entered Phnom Penh. Five days later, General Leclerc, the Commander of the French Forces in the Far East, arrested Son Ngoc Thanh and finally deported him to Saigon as a prisoner on the ground that his interests were inimical to the security of the Allied troops and the interests of Cambodia.⁹ Deprived of Thanh's leadership and lacking adequate material resources, the moderates could not muster an effective popular

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶ *Cambodge* (Phnom Penh), September 7, 1945.

⁷ Ellen J. Hammer, "Indochina," in Lawrence K. Rosinger (ed.), *The State of Asia* (London, 1951) p. 236.

⁸ *Cambodge*, September 13, 1945.

⁹ *Ibid.*

front against the French. Many fled to Thailand and others joined the Vietminhs in Vietnam.

The conservatives were now free to plot the future of post-war Cambodia without opposition. The succeeding Cabinet, now led by Prince Sisowath Monireth, uncle of King Sihanouk, was ready to negotiate with the French. France was equally eager to do likewise for various reasons. First of all, the French image among the Indo-Chinese peoples had been adversely marred by its war record before the Japanese. Second, the Vietminhs north of the parallel were waging a relentless liberation struggle which was fast depleting French resources. Finally, as stated earlier, France needed Cambodia to rehabilitate its war-damaged economy.

The Royal Government was eager to end the hostilities between the French forces and the Cambodian. This attitude of accommodation on the part of King Sihanouk was a complete reversal of his previous position on the question of retaining Cambodian independence. Hence, he and his followers contended that certain "practical reasons" forced them to reaffirm their loyalty to France. First, the independence granted by the Japanese suffered greatly from a basic legal weakness, namely, the Cambodian sovereignty had not been formally recognized by the Tokyo Government.¹⁰ Second, despite the long years of French hegemony in the country, Cambodia still lacked the necessary trained personnel to run an independent government. If the French were to withdraw suddenly, Cambodian administration would be paralyzed. Third, the conservatives also felt that they could not recover the Western provinces of Cambodia namely,, Battambang, Sisophon and part of Siem reap which had been annexed by Thailand in 1941 with French aid. Fourth, Cambodia did not have the wherewithal to fight the French.

Perhaps, the most significant justification for the rapprochement with France was the fear of the resurgent Vietnamese seeking hegemony over Vietnam. This was not an unfounded rationalization in the light of Cambodia's historic feud with Vietnam, and Thailand. This fear was further exacerbated by the radical ideas emanating from Vietnam, ideas considered to be inimical to the interests of the monarchy. King Sihanouk viewed these developments with alarm especially because critical denunciations had already been heaped upon him by Thanh's

¹⁰ *Information Service of the Royal Government*, (Phnom Penh, 1952). p. 6.

radical followers, who regarded him as "pro-French and a traitor to the nation."

In these circumstances, Sihanouk was left with two possible courses of action: he could openly declare his hostility against the French and join the ranks of the nationalists or align himself with French colonialism. Either way his power and position would be clearly jeopardized. If he completely sided with the nationalists' cause on the one hand, he would certainly be unseated in the process by the people. Moreover, the French as kingmakers were powerful enough to effect his abdication in an attempt to perpetuate their control over Cambodia. On the one hand, if he opted for alignment with the French, he would surely be branded a "traitor", an epithet which he abhorred.

It was clear that Sihanouk desired neither course. Inevitably, therefore, he had to follow a "middle-of-the-road" policy which would enable him to rally the country's nationalist forces on his side without losing the protective umbrella of France.

On January 7, 1946, the *Modus Vivendi* was signed between Cambodia and France, an act which re-established French power in Cambodia. Although Sihanouk assured his subjects that France would be sympathetic to the nationalist aspirations of the Cambodians;¹¹ the moderates nevertheless remained unconvinced. From this reaction issued two divergent movements: one adopted the constitutional method to regain independence, and the other joined the *Khmer Issarak*s in the latter's armed struggle for liberation.

Commenting on the *Modus Vivendi*, E. J. Hammer wrote: "Despite a somewhat wider participation in the administration of the country after 1945, the situation in Cambodia remained much the same as before the war."¹² The *Modus Vivendi* was supposed to have conceded a certain degree of autonomy to the Cambodian government. Cambodian autonomy, however existed only in principle. In practice the French officials enjoyed very extensive powers, which embraced practically almost every sphere of Cambodian national life. They regulated public order and maintained an armed forces. On the whole, they also dominated the political and economic spheres in the country. To make matters worse, none of these French officials were answerable to the Cambodian government. This state of affairs occasioned enough bitterness on the part of the Cambodian people, as to desire the restoration of whatever had been gained towards

¹¹ *Cambodge*, October 23, 1945.

²¹ Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), p. 161.

the attainment of independence during the Japanese interregnum.

Three major political forces began to emerge towards 1945, as a reaction to the French reimposition of the status *ante bellum* in Cambodia. The most notable of these was the *Khmer Issaraks*, an organization founded in Bangkok by a retired Cambodian official, Pock Khun, early in 1945, for the purpose of regaining Cambodian independence.¹³ His areas of recruitment were Battambang, the Siem reap, and Kraland. A number of those recruited were followers of Son Ngoc Thanh who, upon Thanh's arrest, joined the *Khmer Issaraks*. The signing of the *Modus Vivendi*, which definitely re-established French power in Cambodia, drove more Cambodians to join the organization.

The Issarak movement gained the support of Thailand since the Thais wished to re-acquire Angkor (in the Siem reap province). Hence, during Pridi Panomyong's reign in 1944, Thailand gave a quasi-official recognition of the movement. The Issarak leaders enjoyed freedom of movement in southern Thailand, especially in their propaganda campaign against the French in Cambodia.¹⁴

Towards 1946 the Issaraks were already launching sporadic attacks on the border of Cambodia which the French effectively quelled. However, Issarak incursions in the countrysides disrupted the normal agricultural activities of the peasants, a development which precipitated their exodus from the rural areas. Consequently, agricultural production declined and plunged to near famine. The Issarak movement, however, posed no military threat to French authority in Cambodia.

In the meantime, the constitutionalist section of the moderate nationalists had been employing non-violent constitutional methods to gain Cambodian independence from the French. This group had consistently adopted a cautious policy toward French colonialism while extending continuous support of the monarchy. The most prominent among this group, the Democratic Party, was formed by Prince Youthevong, a member of the royal family who had socialist leanings. It was this party which dominated the political arena after the proclamation of the Electoral Law in 1946.

The Democratic Party expressed "loyalty to the monarch, and advocated a constitutional monarchical system of government with a popularly elected assembly having legislative and deliberative powers. It also stood for the principle of govern-

¹³ Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *Minority Problems in Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955), p. 173.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

ment by majority; and the economic, intellectual and moral amelioration of Cambodian people."¹⁵ The party rejected linking Cambodia to the Indochinese Federation but advocated instead its joining the French Union based on the principles of equality and liberty.¹⁶ It proposed to achieve independence from the French through constitutional means but continued to maintain its basically anti-French orientation.

When the Democratic Party came to power on September 1, 1946 as a result of a sweeping victory during the elections of the year, it proceeded to draft a liberal constitution with adequate provisions for civil liberties, political rights, a bicameral legislature, and the succession to the monarchy in the event of the death or abdication of the reigning monarch. King Sihanouk was forced to proclaim the liberal constitution, because of his fast waning popularity among the Cambodian intellectuals, civil servants, and students who reacted negatively to the sudden reversal of the monarchical policy toward the French. In his desire to rally this section of the nationalists as a counterpoise to the Issarak movement, Sihanouk supported Yodthevong Cabinet.

On the other hand, the French authorities in Cambodia viewed the liberal tendencies of the Democratic Party with hostility. French opposition to the Party came to a head during the "Black Star" incident in February 1947. The French utilized the incident to arrest prominent leaders of the Party, claiming that about fifteen of its members were in conspiracy with the Issarak rebel movement. The arrested Cambodians were then deported to Saigon after having been detained for some months.¹⁷

Understandably the Democratic Party, despite its well-organized political infrastructure, was hamstrung by the actual occupation of Cambodia by the French, a condition which denied the basic political rights inherent in an independent government. For instance, it could neither organize its own armed forces nor contract treaties in the light of its national interests.¹⁸

To aggravate the already restrictive conditions in Cambodian politics, the Democratic Party activities were further hampered by the economic dislocation and political chaos of the period. In order to minimize the problems confronting the Kingdom, the Youthevong Cabinet appealed to the patriotic sentiments of the Issaraks and urged them to return to the

¹⁵ Reddi, *Cambodian Independence*, p. 125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132-133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

national fold.¹⁹ The Issaraks, on the other hand, responded to the Royal Government's offer of amnesty.²⁰ Towards the end of 1947, the Issaraks were surrendering to the Royal Government with increasing regularity. The mass surrender of the Issaraks was indicative of an over-all malaise that plagued the effective conduct of their anti-French propaganda. In the first place, the Issaraks relied too much on Thailand for support. When Thailand finally stopped giving aid and support to them in southern Thailand the movement had to abandon its base there. Secondly, the movement was splintered into various factions, a condition which adversely affected the coordinated execution of the group's policies, tactics, strategies. Finally, certain Issarak factions which had resorted to banditry alienated many Cambodians in the provinces. The rest were too disillusioned as to re-align their loyalty to the Royal Government. Thus, the Youthevong Cabinet was credited for the break-up of the Issarak movement and for enlisting its membership in support for the constitutional struggle against the French with the tacit approval of the King.

Meanwhile, a sizable section of the Issaraks began to seek Vietminh assistance in their fight against French rule. These Issaraks had no illusions about the motives of French colonialism in Cambodia. As earlier mentioned, after the arrest of Son Ngoc Thanh (October, 1945) some of his followers joined the Khmer Issarak in Thailand and later on operated in Battambang and the Siem reap region. Others fled to Cochin-china (now southern Vietnam) to organize a resistance movement with the help of the Vietminhs. The determining factor here was not really their belief in Marxian ideology, but the patriotic desire to dismantle French colonialism in Cambodia completely.²¹ Prominent among them was Pach Chhoeun, who resigned from the Cabinet the day after Prime Minister Son Ngoc Thanh's arrest and withdrew to Cochin-china. He united all the anti-French elements, and with the assistance of the Vietmins he organized a resistance movement.

Pach Chhoeun organized a Committee of Independent Cambodia in Soctrong (in Cochin-china) which aimed, among others, to draw the attention of the world to the Cambodian independence movement.²² However, after a few months Pach Chhoeun surrendered to the French authorities and was later on banished to France to join Son Ngoc Thanh. After this the activities of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²² Thompson and Adloff, *Minority Problems*, p. 175.

the resistance organization until the surrender of the Issaraks from Bangkok sometime in 1947 are not clearly known (this was attested to by V. M. Reddi). It can be presumed that the resistance fizzled out with the surrender and deportation of Pach Chhoeun.

In the meantime the Vietminh had re-organized the remaining Issarak elements and tried to link the Issarak movement with that of the Vietminhs in Vietnam. A Committee for Khmer Liberation was formed with Dap Chhoeun of Siem reap as president.²³ The task of the committee was to coordinate Issarak operations with that of the Vietminh's resistance to the French.²⁴ Towards the end of 1948, almost the whole of Cambodia became the arena of Vietminh-Khmer Issarak activities. The collaboration of the Khmer Issaraks with the Vietminhs so alarmed the Royal Government that the latter even solicited French support against the imminent threat posed by the Khmer Issaraks and the Vietminhs. Because the French promise of support did not come the Royal Government appealed again to the patriotic sentiments of the Khmer Issaraks (now associated with the Vietminhs) to lay down their arms. In a series of amnesty proclamation in May, 1948, the Royal Government, now headed by Penn Nouth, proclaimed that independence was the prime concern of the government, but armed rebellion was not only unnecessary but was also harmful to the government's negotiations with France for Cambodian independence.²⁵

By the latter part of 1948, French Vietminh relations had deteriorated. This had actually started sometime in 1946 when France had shown reluctance in implementing the March 1946 agreement it signed with Ho Chi Minh recognizing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam "as a free state with its own government, parliament, army, and finances, forming part of the Indochinese Federation and the French Union."²⁶ Furthermore, France refused to hold a referendum on the matter of uniting Tongking, Annam, and Conchin-china to form a united Vietnam. Instead, in the Ha Long Bay Agreement, France brought back Bao Dai to Vietnam as a counterpoise to the growing popularity of Ho Chi Minh. In this agreement, the French incorporated the word "independence," without intending to give real meaning and substance to it. This subterfuge on the part of the French eventually became widely known in Indochina and resulted in the improved propaganda position of the Vietminhs.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Reddi, *Cambodian Independence*, p. 156.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157. 7

Using these developments in Vietnam to bolster their stand, the Khmer Issaraks now associated with the Vietminhs undermine the fundamental argument of the Cambodian Royal Government. Eventually they proved that there could be no real independence within the framework of a French Union.

On November 9, 1948, King Sihanouk was compelled to appeal to the French to give substance to its promise of independence. He pointed out that if France failed to grant Cambodia its independence, the monarchy and the welfare of the people would be endangered in the face of mounting Issarak opposition. The King also stressed that the granting of the independence did not constitute a break with France.

On the contrary, he declared, he could not "conceive of Cambodian independence without France and the French Union."²⁷ In response to Sihanouk's appeal, the French President V. Auriol recognized the independence of Cambodia within the framework of the French Union on November 28, 1948.²⁸ A month after, the independence of Cambodia within the framework of the French Union was proclaimed in Phnom Penh.²⁹ Once again King Sihanouk enjoined the Cambodian people, especially the Khmer Issaraks, to return to the national fold and to put an end to insecurity in the country.³⁰

The post-1949 was the most critical in Cambodia's struggle for freedom. The Franco-Cambodian treaty of 1949 and the Conventions signed in 1950 actually conceded limited freedom to Cambodia. In the end these agreements did not work out satisfactorily for the Cambodian nationalists, including the King. As a result, after 1949 certain important alignments in the nationalist ranks were forged which greatly influenced the eventual course of the movement.

The first was the emergence of Marxist-oriented Issarak radicalism which threatened the very foundations of Cambodian life and institutions, as well as that of the monarch. Secondly, the return of Son Ngoc Thanh to Phnom Penh (1951) upon the King's representation with the French, rallied nationalists behind him who were even more popular than the King. The third was the chronic political instability of the government because of the existing multiplicity of parties and groups. For instance, the powerful Democratic Party split into mutually-warring groups. One faction supported the King while the

²⁷ Sam Sary, *Le grande figure*, p. 17. Cited in Reddi, *Cambodian Independence*, p. 159.

²⁸ *Cambodge*, November 23, 1948.

²⁹ *Cambodge*, December 29, 1948.

³⁰ *Cambodge*, December 22, 1948.

others maintained that he should not stand in the way of the Parliament. In response to this splintering of the Democratic Party, the King dissolved Parliament on June 15, 1952. Sihanouk then assumed personal rule of the Kingdom and the leadership of the independence struggle.

The upsurge of nationalism among the Cambodian people after 1959 became more pronounced. The Vietminh-inspired Khmer Vietminhs denounced the Franco-Cambodian treaty of November 1949 as an imperialist design to keep Cambodia a colony.³¹ They urged the Cambodians to resist and launch an armed struggle against the French. This exhortation did not fall on deaf ears. A fresh outbreak of acts of terrorism as well as a wave of anti-French and anti-Government propaganda swept the kingdom. Then Son Ngoc Thanh returned from exile, to an enthusiastic welcome. Now Sihanouk faced a formidable challenge to his leadership.

Up to this time he had been acting as a sort of a buffer between the two contending political forces: the militant nationalism of the Khmer Vietminhs and Son Ngoc Thanh on the one hand and the dogged determination of the French to retain Cambodia as a colony. Accused of subservience to the French, he not only lost the support of the politicians, students, civil servants and Buddhist monks among his constituents but he also alienated the Khmer Vietminhs from the throne, forcing them to drift further toward Marxism.

Alarmed, Sihanouk went to work openly for his country's freedom to retrieve both his throne and his waning popularity. Thus, compelled by national as well as personal interests, the King set out on a crusade fashioned after his people's sentiments, "if possible without losing the friendship of France, but if necessary even losing it."³² On March 1953 he launched the movement now popularly known as the "Croisade royale pour l'indépendance."

The King went to the French Riviera where he plotted the course of action toward the pursuit of Cambodian independence. On March 5, 1953, he wrote French President V. Auriol in which he justified the immediate grant of Cambodian independence. He stressed the fact that the present French policy ran the risk of totally losing Cambodia to the communist Vietminhs.³³ The French government, however, did not give his letter much import. The French President even encouraged the

³¹ *Vietnam Information No. 385/VNS-R*, April 25, 1951. Cited in Reddi, *Cambodian Independence*, p. 178.

³² Reddi, *Cambodian Independence*, p. 199.

³³ *Ibid.*

King to return home. Disappointed, he proceeded to the United States hoping to influence world opinion on Cambodian independence.³⁴ King Sihanouk also hoped to pressure the French Government to change its attitude toward the Cambodian appeal for the immediate grant of independence.

In the United States, King Sihanouk criticized the stubborn French policy vis-a-vis Cambodian sovereignty claiming that the continuation of French rule in Cambodia had encouraged rather than abated communist infiltration in the country. He further stated that there was a growing conviction among the Cambodian people that only the Communist-inspired Khmer Vietminhs were fighting for independence. He also added that even with the grant of independence Cambodia would still join France in fighting Communism.³⁵ In answer to his appeal for support, Secretary of State Dulles made Sihanouk understand that while the U.S. was sympathetic to Cambodia nationalist aspirations, it did not believe that the time was right for independence in view of the Communist threat.³⁶

He returned frustrated to Phnom Penh, but left again after two months for Bangkok on June 13, 1953 on a self-imposed exile "to alert world opinion." This time, he expressed himself with some force and even warned the French that if they continued to ignore the Cambodian struggle for independence, there would be a general uprising in which all Cambodians would be likely to participate. Declaring an uncompromising stand on the issue, Sihanouk publicly stated:

"At this decisive turning-point in our national history and in relations with France, I have to choose between France and my people. I have obviously chosen my people."³⁷

On June 16, 1953, King Sihanouk moved his battle to the Battambang-Siem reap region where he was joined by many of his constituents in his renewed struggle for independence. Issarak elements surrendered to the Royal Government and vowed to work with the King until independence was regained. The French responded by bringing in foreign troops from Vietnam, Algeria, Morocco, and other areas, cordoning Phnom Penh and installing cannons around the city.³⁸ The Royal Gov-

³⁴ *Cambodge*, April 8-9, 1953.

³⁵ *Le Monde*, April 23, 1953.

³⁶ John P. Armstrong, *Sihanouk Speaks* (New York: Walker & Co., 1964), p. 65.

³⁷ Norodom Sihanouk, "Note Royale (Personelle)," *Livre Jaune sur les Revendications de L'indépendance du Cambodge depuis le 5 mars 1953*, (Gouvernement Royal due Cambodge, 1953), p. 125.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

ernment retaliated by deploying its own troops "at all points occupied by the French troops."³⁹ This debacle in the French-Cambodian relations augered well for the spread of the Vietminh struggle for liberation in Cambodia.

Confronted with the stepped-up activities of the Khmer Vietminhs, and still suffering from the havoc which resistance to the Vietminh liberation struggle wrought on its economy and manpower, France finally capitulated. French popular feeling was for stopping the war in French Indochina and Britain as well as the United States were reluctant to intervene directly pushed the French to grant independence to Cambodia on November 9, 1953. The King returned to Phnom Penh, acclaimed by the people as a national hero. He urged his people to unite for national reconstruction.

One very significant development after the grant of independence was the Cambodian switch from a commitment to fight communism to a neutralist foreign policy. Cambodia committed itself to a policy of non-intervention as long as the Vietminh did not interfere in Cambodian affairs.⁴⁰ This reversal of Cambodian commitment caught the "free world" by surprise even if it was obvious that this shift could not just have been born from a desire to retaliate against the Great Powers. The changed geopolitical realities dictated a neutral policy in order to preserve Cambodian territorial integrity and independence which were the primary goals of Cambodian nationalism.

During the 1960's the West became increasingly convinced that Cambodia's foreign policy was unpredictable and often contradictory. The main brunt of the criticism was directed against the main architect of Cambodia's neutral policy, King Sihanouk, who was reproached for his "fickle-mindedness" and "tightrope diplomacy." These allegations were based on his seemingly vacillating attitudes toward the contending world powers as well as toward other political issues. One day he would attack the United States for the "strings attached" to its "aid" and the next day criticize the Soviet Union for its indecisiveness in helping the developing nations. In the same fashion he would complain bitterly of North Vietnam's expansionism, while at the same time strongly opposing the various anti-communist regimes that were successively established in South Vietnam. Similarly, Sihanouk observed with apprehension Chinese intentions in Southeast Asia.

It was indeed difficult to place Prince Sihanouk (after his abdication on March 2, 1955, his title was changed from *King*

³⁹ *Le Monde*, June 30, 1953.

⁴⁰ Refer to page 45 of this paper.

to *Prince*) in the political spectrum. His diplomatic maneuvers ranged from "courtship" of the United States and France to gain economic and military assistance to "flirtation" with the People's Republic of China to gain technical aid. In terms of the "cold-war" politics initiated and propagated by the West, Sihanouk did not follow a consistent foreign policy. On the other hand, when viewed from the perspective of the central issues in Cambodia at the time, Prince Sihanouk's actions were not only consistent but well conceived. Sihanouk perceived the core of the issues for what it was—"the preservation of the integrity and independence of the Cambodian nation in the face of its much larger neighbors and the world powers who see Southeast Asia as one of the battlefields for their own confrontation."⁴¹

Cambodia's foreign policy was guided by four major considerations:

1. "to avert a confrontation between the cold-war powers on her soil";
2. "to avoid any relationship with a stronger power which may compromise her independence";
3. "to preserve the sanctity of her borders and the security of her people against . . . the imperialistic ambitions of her traditional antagonists — Thailand and Vietnam"; and
4. to be able "to exert some influence upon international events."⁴²

After the Geneva Conference in 1954, the evolution of a neutral policy as conveyed by Cambodia was inevitable in the light of the Great Power competition in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indochina. During the conference the interplay of world power politics in Indochina was irrefutably substantiated. For instance, the extent of the influence of the Peoples' Republic of China's on the Vietminhs became apparent when Chou En-lai, the head of the Chinese delegation, effectively persuaded the Vietminhs to drop their proposal to have a Cambodian communist representative recognized in the conference.⁴³ Seeing this and other influence as an integral aspect of the political reality in Indochina, Sihanouk took extra care

⁴¹ William E. Willmott, "Cambodian Neutrality," in *Conflict in Indochina*, ed. by Marvin Gettleman, et. al. (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 242.

⁴² Roger Smith, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1965), p. 87.

⁴³ Malcolm Caldwell and Lek Tan, *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 47.

in avoiding the overtures of any of the world powers. For instance, to avoid compromising his country's independence and to avoid Cambodian entanglement in the rivalry between the PRC-USSR and the United States and its allies, Sihanouk foiled the United States plan to have Cambodia join the SEATO as a counterpoise to the growing influence of the PRC in Southeast Asia.⁴⁴

Another major factor which necessitated a neutral foreign policy for Cambodia was the fear of being once again overrun by the irredentism of Thailand and the expansionism of Vietnam. This fear was not without basis. Historically, the armies of Thailand (Siam) and Vietnam (Annam) had fought on Cambodian territory; each had imposed its suzerainty over Cambodia at various times and both had occupied large tracts of Cambodian territory either temporarily or permanently.⁴⁵ Prior to the French rule, both Siam and Annam had spawned intrigues in the Khmer court as they furthered their interests in the kingdom. Thai irredentism was manifested more recently during the Japanese occupation when it seized the ancient Khmer temple of Preah Vihear which was located on a rocky promontory in the Dangrek mountains of Cambodia bordering the southern flank of Thailand.⁴⁶ Thailand, however, was to return this temple in 1946 as a result of the Treaty of Washington.⁴⁷

In 1953, upon the withdrawal of the French from Cambodia, Thai irredentism sprung anew when Thai police forces occupied the Preah Vihear temple. The exchange of press and radio attacks which followed this incident further heightened the tension between the two governments. Eventually, in 1959, Cambodia suggested to Thailand two possible solutions to the Preah Vihear problem: the joint administration of the temple by the two countries or the submission of the case to the International Court of Justice at the Hague.⁴⁸ Thailand's refusal to come to an agreement prompted Cambodia to submit the matter to the International Court of Justice. On July 15, 1962, the Court ruled that the temple of Preah Vihear was "situated in the territory under the sovereignty of Cambodia."⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Manomohan Ghosh *A History of Cambodia* (Saigon: G. K. Gupta, 1960), pp. 227-263.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy*, p. 141.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Cited in the Cambodian aide-memoire of June 13, 1959. In Smith, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Despite Thailand's obvious resentment over the Court's decision, it had no choice but to abide by its ruling although not without protest. This resentment became manifest with the erection of barbed wires around the temple on January 4, 1963, while Cambodian forces were occupying it. For Cambodia the act indicated Thailand's deep-seated annexationist interest toward the Kingdom. Cambodian apprehension over Thailand's irrendentism did not take long to be confirmed. On April 1970, a month after the coup d'etat of the Sihanouk government by General Lon Nol, Thailand re-occupied the Preah Vihear temple without a word of protest from the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak regime.⁵⁰ The silence of the regime regarding the Thai reoccupation of Preah Vihear temple was condemned by the Khmer Rouge as proof of the treachery of the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak regime.

On the other hand, Cambodia's relation with South and North Vietnams during the post-independence period go back to Cambodia's historically-rooted suspicion of Vietnamese expansionism. At the height of Annamese expansion, the western provinces of Cambodia — Bienhoa, Giadinh, and Mytho — were annexed to Annam territory.⁵¹ Later the whole of the Cochinchina region was likewise engulfed. So aggressive was Annam's designs on South Cambodia (then referred to as Kampuchea Krom and now as southern Vietnam) that a Cambodian King (Ang Duong) was moved to seek French assistance in 1854 to prevent Annam from nibbling away his kingdom.⁵² However, even with French help Cambodia never recovered Kampuchea Krom. In 1948, Sihanouk wanted the return of South Cambodia, but in the Ha Long Bay Agreement of 1949 between Bao Dai and the French, three more Cambodian provinces — Rachgia, Soctrong, and Travinh — were given to Bao Dai as a reward for his cooperation.⁵³ During the Geneva Conference of 1954, the Royal Government of Cambodia again reiterated its historical rights to the Cambodian territories misappropriated by Annam and France. These territories were eventually incorporated in South Vietnam and later absorbed by the Soc. Rep. of Vietnam.

The withdrawal of the French from Vietnam in 1954 reawakened among some Cambodian leaders fears of Vietnamese expansionism. From the Cambodians' point of view, a united Vietnam would be in a stronger position to embark

⁵⁰ Caldwell and Tan, *Cambodia*, p. 331.

⁵¹ Smith, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy*, p. 153.

⁵² Ghosh, *Cambodia*, pp. 260-261.

⁵³ Reddi, *Cambodian Independence*, p. 157.

on a new phase of expansionism. At this point, the Cambodians were particularly apprehensive of the Vietnamese design to appropriate the rich plains of the Mekong-Tonle Sap-Bassac basin. Because of this, the Cambodian subjected the Vietnamese minorities, the largest minority group in Cambodia, to a tight surveillance and in the early years of the 1960's deported Vietnamese nationals in spite of strong protests from South Vietnam.

In another effort to check Vietnamese expansionism, Cambodia constructed the port of Sihanoukville in the early 1960's to end Cambodian dependence on the port of Saigon. However, during the construction of Sihanoukville (1965) South Vietnam, in retaliation, claimed a group of islands south of Cambodia, South Vietnam had also inherited from the French, the Koh Tral (Phu Quoc), a group of islands situated on the Cambodian maritime waters. Consequently, it was easy for it to initiate Cambodian fishermen in the area. These South Vietnamese maneuvers were enough to confirm Cambodian fears that the Vietnamese were still intent on keeping Cambodia in a subordinate position.

The 1960's further witnessed the heightening of tension between Cambodia and South Vietnam as border violations were often committed by the South Vietnamese in the process of "hot pursuit" of the Vietminhs. This additional irritant finally resulted in the rupture of political relations between the two countries in August 1963.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the Cambodians were worried about the North Vietnamese not so much for their ideology as for the fact that they were Vietnamese. They were aware that during the Geneva Conference (1954), Pham Van Dong proposed that a communist delegation from Cambodia be represented. Moreover, the Vietminhs had always been sympathetic to the Khmer Vietminhs in their fight against the French and Sihanouk's French predilection.

Hence, in the 1960's, the traditional fear of becoming the battleground between two states with historically-rooted irrendentism toward portions of Cambodia territory re-emerged with full vigor and complications and affected all domestic and foreign policies of Cambodia.

It was this sense of insecurity vis-a-vis Thai, South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese irrendentism which convinced Prince Sihanouk to work for diplomatic neutrality after Cambodia regained its independence. He departed from the tradi-

⁵⁴ Smith, *Cambodian Foreign Policy*, p. 162.

tional policy of alignment with a big Power most probably as a reaction to the case of his great-great-grandfather, King Ang Doung, who had sought French protection and ended a victim of French century imperial ambitions in Indochina. Learning from the Cambodian experience under the French protectorate, the Prince was thus guided not only by the need for succor but also by the need to survive without compromising his country's independence.

Yet, ironically, Cambodia condemned the very polarization of power which made it possible for Cambodia to preserve her independence. Since both camps sought to influence the unaligned nations, Sihanouk played one bloc against the other in order to pressure the big powers to restrain their Southeast Asian allies in their designs against Cambodia. For instance, in the early 1960's, when Thailand and South Vietnam escalated their violation of Cambodian territorial integrity, Prince Sihanouk threatened to seek Chinese assistance unless the United States stopped the black propaganda being directed by Thailand and South Vietnam against his country. Similarly, it was apparently the fear that Cambodia might forsake its neutral policy, and join the SEATO that prompted China in 1963 to restrain North Vietnam from actively supporting the Khmer Vietminhs.

In anticipation of the time when his neighbors would nevertheless undertake further 'amputations' of his territory, Prince Sihanouk proceeded to seek international recognition of Cambodia's neutral position. In 1962 he appealed to the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union to convene a Geneva-type conference to discuss the neutrality of Cambodia.⁵⁵ The Prince appealed to President Kennedy to exert influence among the Big Powers to convene such a conference. However, the American President side-stepped the main problem cited by the Prince's letter since his acquiescence to Cambodia's request or any help extended by the U.S. to guarantee further Cambodia's neutrality would be tantamount to an admission of its allies', Thailand's and South Vietnam's aggressive designs on Cambodian territory.⁵⁶ The United States President was left no choice except to encourage the three states to settle their border disputes among themselves. Cambodia, however, knew that any border settlements arrived at with its neighbors would not be binding unless enforced by the Big Powers.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190-191.

⁵⁶ Portions of these letters were cited in Simth, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy*, pp. 190-191.

The Communist bloc on the other hand, particularly China and North Vietnam, favored the holding of such a conference and signified to Cambodia their willingness to recognize the latter's frontiers and neutrality (1962).⁵⁷ Falling to secure American commitment to call that conference, Cambodia had to consider a new approach to ensure its territorial integrity. At the beginning of 1963, Cambodia began to receive assurances from the People's Republic of China and North Vietnam of their support of Cambodian neutrality.

Meanwhile, relations between Cambodia and the United States worsened in the middle of 1963 as anti-Sihanouk radio broadcasts emanating from the Khmer Serei propaganda based in Thailand and South Vietnam increased in virulence. Moreover, the repeated incursions by the South Vietnamese forces on Cambodian territory had prejudiced the rapprochement between the United States and its allies and Cambodia. As the Vietnam war turned in favor of the Vietminhs, Cambodia was gradually drawn into the war as the United States became more and more deeply involved in Thai and South Vietnamese expansionism. Consequently, Cambodia accepted Chinese economic aid as well as North Vietnamese support for its neutrality. Although Prince Sihanouk was not yet prepared at this stage to join the communist camp against the United States, the decision had to be made in response to the need to protect Cambodia's national security. When the United States refused to protect Cambodia on the issue of neutrality, it was only logical for Sihanouk to accept PRC's and North Vietnam's offer of support. Thus, with the final diplomatic rupture with the United States, the increased cooperation between Cambodia and PRC and the progressive determination of Cambodian relations with Thailand and South Vietnam in 1965, and the collapse of an otherwise ingenious diplomatic policy had become inevitable.

In the study of Cambodia's final collapse in 1970, it is essential to elucidate the factors which eventually revealed the futility of Cambodian neutrality and the inevitability of the declaration of a war for national liberation against, in Prince Sihanouk's words, "US imperialism and its lackeys" in Cambodia.

The September 1966 elections clearly indicated the polarization of the political forces in Cambodia. On one side were the reactionaries who disagreed with Prince Sihanouk's neutral policy in favor of rapprochement with the United States and

⁵⁷ Caldwell & Tan, *Cambodia*, p. 169.

its allies, and on the other were the progressives who continued to gain popularity as notable figures in the Royal Government were hounded by the reactionaries into defecting to the guerilla zones. With the departure of the notable progressives in the Royal Government, right-wing membership in the National Assembly multiplied. Immediately after the election with General Lon Nol as Prime Minister, a right-wing Cabinet was formed. The New Prime Minister was the embodiment of the aspirations of the businessmen, landlords, and their political allies who wanted to resume the vitality of Cambodian trade and commerce. General Lon Nol and his supporters were averse to the Prince's neutralist policy as it obstructed the flow of dollars to Cambodia and hampered business operations. Hence, this group longed for the return of American aid and business to Cambodia.

Once installed as Prime Minister, General Lon Nol launched a campaign against Cambodians identified with the left. In the Battambang revolt of 1966, peasants who were dispossessed of their lands demonstrated against the Lon Nol regime. The Prime Minister retaliated with a brutal campaign of repression against the protesters, and peasant leader who continue to oppose the regime were "liquidated".⁵⁶ Lon Nol was greatly alarmed by the unrelenting resistance of the peasants and by the massive support they received from peasants of the neighboring provinces. He branded the rebellion a communist plot to sow dissension in that part of Cambodia.⁵⁹

Meantime, progressive elements in the National Assembly, like Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, and Hu Nim, who came to the defense of the peasants, were immediately branded as "foreign agents" by the Lon Nol regime. Many other sympathetic government figures like former Minister Chau Séng and So Nem, who supported the progressives' stand, were also attacked by the right for their leftist leanings. In a general assault on the progressives, many school teachers, academicians, and others who were critical of the Lon Nol government or who were known for their progressive views were arrested and executed. By April 1967 most of the notable progressives in government like Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, and Hu Nim had already disappeared from the Cambodian political scene and several hundred intellectuals had suffered the same fate. However, it was only by the middle of 1969 that the Phnom

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Penh official press admitted a number of well-known radicals had disappeared only to reappear among the *maquish*.⁶⁰

With the elimination of the progressive elements from the government, the Lon Nol Regime started preparing the ground for the final seizure of political power. The problem of eliminating Sihanouk was their only obstacle. However, the popularity of Sihanouk made this obstacle more formidable than that presented by the progressive elements.

Despite his popularity, Sihanouk began to lose his grip on the political situation in the years 1966 and 1967. During the Battambang crisis of 1966, he was able to defuse the critical situation through such palliative measures as the institution of infrastructure projects, construction of destroyed houses and increased medical aid to affected areas. However, he failed to reverse the process which had led to the progressive deterioration of the political and economic situation in Battambang. Besides, Sihanouk never knew what the real conditions were since the Lon Nol government kept critical information from him. Hence, Sihanouk was unduly optimistic about the responsiveness of the masses to his political maneuvers. Insulated within the cordon sanitaire built by the Lon Nol regime around him, Sihanouk began to lose track of the real import of Cambodian events.

September 1967 was the critical month which saw the build-up of events in the Cambodian political scene which culminated in the coup of March 18, 1970. Unwittingly, Prince Sihanouk made two major moves which actually helped the plans of the Lon Nol cabinet to bring Cambodia into the Western camp. He began by closing down the friendship associations and student unions, especially the *Amitie Khmero-Chinoise* (AAKC) and the *Association Generale des Etudiants Khmers* (AGEK). Next, he muzzled the press, the *La Nouvelle Depeche du Cambodge* in particular. Sihanouk construed or was led to construe that the AAKC had gone beyond their purpose of cultural, artistic, and economic exchanges and contacts by spreading subversive foreign ideologies and anti-national propaganda⁶¹ and that the AGEK was responsible for the violent anti-government demonstrations staged by the radicals in Phnom Penh in 1966 and 1967.

These moves eventually led to the repression of the Cambodian press which, Sihanouk alleged, had become a mere propaganda outlet for either the "free world" or the communist

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

camp. *La Nouvelle Depeche* was silenced and with it, the last venue for airing criticisms against the government. Moreover, all foreign newspapers were banned from Cambodia.

These developments worked in favor of the Lon Nol regime's plan to wean Sihanouk from the socialist bloc and eventually to draw him closer to the Western bloc, to the United States in particular. However, contrary to Lon Nol's expectations, the intended change in Cambodian foreign policy did not materialize with the escalation of the U.S.-South Vietnam border violations in the middle of 1967. On May 19, Prince Sihanouk called upon the world to reiterate his fifteen-year campaign for international recognition of Cambodia's neutrality and territorial integrity within its existing frontiers. DRV and NLF immediately responded in favor of Sihanouk's appeal. The NLF recognized Cambodia's neutrality. In the same communication, the NLF condemned acts of aggression against Cambodia by the United States and its South Vietnamese and Thai allies, and opposed any change in the existing Cambodian frontiers.⁶² The DRV also concurred with the NLF's declaration. By the end of the year twenty-three other countries had responded to Sihanouk's call. These included France, Singapore, East Germany, USSR, PRC, North Korea, Cuba, Egypt, Yugoslavia, Poland, and the Republic of the Philippines among others.⁶³

That the United States and its allies, South Vietnam and Thailand remained silent might easily be explained. Firstly, the United States and its allies could not accept the conditions imposed by Sihanouk since to recognize the existing frontiers of Cambodia would be tantamount to giving up the Cambodian territories from which American forces have been strafing Vietminh "sanctuaries." Secondly, it was in the middle of 1967 that the greatest number of aggressions had been perpetrated on Cambodian territories and people by the forces of U.S.-South Vietnam-Thailand alliance. Now to accept Sihanouk's conditions would mean the de-escalation of a war they had every intention of escalating. Hence, the only strategy left to the United States, South Vietnam, and Thailand was to widen the Vietnam war so as to include Cambodia.

The year 1967 proved to be the watershed of Cambodian politics. That year, Prince Sihanouk, as a result of the worsening situation along Cambodia's borders, was being strongly drawn into the socialist camp, where he could always find

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

strong support in his battle for the preservation of his country's strict neutrality and non-alignment. It was also the year Prime Minister Lon Nol, finally succeeded in filling his Cabinet and the National Assembly with his supporters and in eliminating leftist opposition in Phnom Penh.

Having forced the Cambodian left out of legitimate politics, Lon Nol and his supporters now began easing out the *Sihanoukists*, the loyal supporters of the Prince. As their most notable achievement of this campaign, they forced the resignation of Sonn San, one of Prince Sihanouk's principal advisers. They progressively isolated Sonn San from government circles and made his position intolerable. Even in the armed forces, they moved against known Sihanoukists who were dismissed and replaced by Lon Nol's nominees. Civilian governors in the provinces were replaced by military officers loyal to Lon Nol ostensibly because of the widespread disorder spawned by the Khmer Rouge. Department chiefs in various ministries known to be loyal to the Prince were also removed. The "creeping coup" was substantially completed by 1969. All that was need now was to set up the palace coup that would unseat the Prince himself.

From 1968 to 1969 it was clear that Prince Sihanouk had become increasingly cut off from reality. Surrounded by Lon Nol's supporters, he was no longer being informed of the government's activities. As a matter of fact, he never knew that he was reigning without ruling and that this lack of awareness was abetted by his constant confrontation with the complex interaction of various social forces at work in Cambodia, i.e., the hatching *maquis*, the American-South Vietnamese-Thai aggressions, the American plot with the Lon Nol group, and the fast deteriorating Cambodian economy.

Preparations for the forthcoming coup had more or less been completed by the end of 1969 and it was then just a matter of waiting for the right moment. When Prince Sihanouk left for Grasse (January 1970), a summer resort in the French Riviera, Lon Nol and his men had considerable elbow room to set the spark that would ignite the coup. During his absence, the Lon Nol group revived the issue of anti-Vietnamese feelings among Cambodians by accusing the North Vietnamese of designs to annex portions of Cambodian territory. Since the Cambodians had a long history of fighting against the Vietnamese, it did not take long for the Cambodians to stage demonstrations in front of the DRV embassy in Phnom Penh, protesting the pre-

sense of Vietminhs along the borders of Cambodia.⁶⁴ The series of demonstrations in February 1970 had been described as "well-organized" and "stage-managed."⁶⁵ This upheaval in Phnom Penh gave the plotters the excuse to intimidate Sihanouk (who was still in France) into reversing his policies toward the DRV. On March 12, 1970 the Cabinet cabled Sihanouk for such a change in policy. At the same time, Lon Nol demanded that the North Vietnamese and NLF troops leave Cambodian soil within seventy-two hours. The removal of Prince Sihanouk as Head of State was only a breath away.

On March 18, 1970 at 1:00 p.m. the National Assembly voted that the Prince be temporarily replaced by Cheng Heng, one of the major plotters. The decision was broadcast shortly afterwards. Significantly, there was no spontaneous manifestation of popular approval in Phnom Penh or in the provinces.

The Prince heard the news in Moscow as he was boarding the plane for Peking. He left Moscow for Peking upon failure to receive an assurance of support from the Russians. He was now going to Peking to enlist the support of the Chinese. Contrary to his expectations, the Chinese received him as the Head of State of Cambodia. With Chinese support, the Prince now prepared for a protracted struggle.

II. THE FORMATION OF THE NATIONAL UNITED FRONT OF KAMPUCHEA (NUFK)⁶⁶

Prince Sihanouk told Chou En-lai that he would fight the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak clique, and he was assured of the "total and unshakable support of the Chinese people."⁶⁷ Hence, on March 23, 1970, the Prince announced the formation of the National United Front of Kampuchea (NUFK), a broad alliance of all progressive social forces of Cambodia for the struggle against United States imperialism and the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak government.⁶⁸ He also announced the formation of a National Liberation Army and exhorted patriotic Cambodians to enlist in its ranks. Significantly, he also announced

⁶⁴ T. D. Allman, "Anatomy of a Coup," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 9, 1970.

⁶⁵ Michael Leifer, "Political Uheaval in Cambodia," *The World Today*, XXVI (May 1970), p. 79.

⁶⁶ The discussion hereon will be confined mainly to the formation of the National United Front of Kampuchea (NUFK) as the broad alliance of progressive forces in Cambodia for a war of liberation, against the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak clique.

⁶⁷ Caldwell and Tan, *Cambodia*, p. 266.

⁶⁸ *Le Monde*, April 7, 1970. From the text of "Message and Solemn Declaration by Samdech Norodom Sihanok, Cambodian Head of State, March 23, 1970.

the establishment of a New National Union Government (GRUNK) whose members would come from all circles of the Khmer society — monks, peasants, workers merchants, army-men, youth, intellectuals, women, etc. (The GRUNK became the important legal body that would plan and direct the overall war of national liberation.)

The whole tone of the Prince's March 23 message did not fail to strike responsive chords among the people, and not even the restrictions of the Phnom Penh ruling clique could censor the news from filtering into Cambodia. On March 25, 26, and 27 pro-Sihanouk riots broke out in several provincial towns. At the same time Khmer Rouge leaders and former deputies in the erstwhile Sihanouk government who had fled to the *maquis* in 1967, pledged to support Sihanouk's proclamation of March 23.⁶⁹ In a message addressed to the people of Cambodia Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, and Hu Nim exhorted all progressive forces in Cambodia "to march forward under the banner of the NUFK to defeat U.S. imperialists and the traitors, Lon Nol and Sirik Matak."⁷⁰

The immediate response of the Khmer Rouge now linked the armed struggle in the countrysides to the struggle of the masses of oppressed workers, professionals and youths in the cities. This enabled the revolutionary guerrillas to acquire legal backing together with an organized political infrastructure in the *maquis* as well as in the cities.

Having enlisted Sihanouk on their side, the Khmer Rouge guerrillas gave the movement new impetus uncommon to similar revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia. Aptly, the Khmer Rouge made Sihanouk the rallying symbol particularly in the villages where the deposed Head of State was immensely popular. Upon entering a village, Cambodian cadres distributed Sihanouk portraits explaining to the villagers why the Prince could not return and conveying to them his March 23 proclamation. Since the Prince was genuinely revered by the countryfolk, converting them did not prove to be a difficult task. By May-June 1970, the guerrillas had clearly gained impetus as more and more of the peasantry, moved by their desire for survival, their social grievances, and their reverence for the Prince, opted to support the movement.

On May 5 Prince Sihanouk, as chairman of the NUFK, released the Political Programme of the NUFK which defined

⁶⁹ Statement of Support to Prince Norodom Sihanouk by the three Cambodian deputies, Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, Hu Mim, March 26, 1970. Cited in the Appendix 6 of Caldwell and Tan, *Cambodia*, pp. 394-398.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

the political, social, and economic goals of the war of national liberation. Its primarily political aim reads as follows:

“... to realize the broadest national union for fighting against against all the maneuvers and aggression of the American imperialists, overthrowing the dictatorship of their flunkys headed by the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak and for defending the national independence, peace, neutrality, and sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country within her present frontiers and for building a free and democratic regime of the people progressing towards the construction of a prosperous Cambodia conforming to the profound aspirations of our people.”⁷¹

This political goal was envisioned in the light of the determination to build-up and develop an independent national economy by relying principally on the resources and productive forces of Cambodia.⁷² It proposed an economic policy designed to free the national economy from the excesses of private capital, guaranteeing at the same time a gradual phasing out of private ownership of the forces of production. It also guaranteed to the peasants the right to the land they tilled and to assistance in increasing land and labour productivity. It also proposed to carry out the industrialization of the country and to formulate a rational industrial policy so that production would meet the principal needs of the people to the maximum. Moreover, it proposed a policy of nationalization of the banks and foreign trade. In short, the economic policy envisioned was to lay down the base for the real democratization of Cambodian society.

Alongside these economic goals, the social goals of the NUFK ensured and supported extensive political, civic, and cultural education among the people and the youth.

The political programme of the NUFK was generally a definition of strategy and tactics in the liberation struggle against U.S. imperialism and its “flunkys.” In particular, the NUFK stressed the all-important idea of armed struggle in the dismantling of US imperialism before a viable economic emancipation could be undertaken.

At this point, perhaps, a look at the role of Sihanouk in this liberation struggle would enable us to appreciate the unique forging of a united front of progressive elements with a monarch as the rallying symbol of national liberation. Prince Sihanouk's alliance with the Cambodian masses was really the climax of his own political development, from the time he was

⁷¹ Political Programme of National United Front of Kampuchea, *Peking Review*, May 15, 1970, p. 8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

placed on the throne by the French as a safe successor to the time he was finally deposed by the Lon Nol clique.

During his entire reign, Sihanouk had always defended his country's neutrality and territorial integrity through means that often disconcerted the West. In the words of Han Suyin, Sihanouk "is a rare man born of royal blood and endowed with a French education who should have transcended the barriers of his own kingly, feudal upbringing and his acquired 'westren orientation,' and achieved such insight into the forces that transform emergent nations."⁷³

In the past, he was often chided for having "flirted with the Reds" but a deeper look at Cambodian history would reveal that Sihanouk was acutely aware of the precarious position of his little kingdom vis-a-vis the changed political conditions in post-war Indochina. Moreover, he was cognizant of the fact that the United States would rather support its allies who were bent on dismembering Cambodian territory than accord Cambodia an international guarantee for its neutrality. Thus, he correctly perceived the PRC could be a counterpoise to American design in Indochina. The 1960's saw PRC's and PRC's and North Vietnam's respect for Cambodian neutrality as indicated by their ready response to Sihanouk's demand for recognition of neutrality and respect for territorial integrity. Perhaps it was this genuine respect for Cambodian neutrality which convinced Sihanouk to align himself finally with the communist camp in 1970.

This crucial decision to move toward the communist camp, therefore, should not be viewed as the conversion of the Prince to the communist ideology, but rather as a result of his over-riding concern over the preservation of the territorial integrity of the Khmer nation. Since it was only PRC which had consistently respected Cambodian integrity, Sihanouk chose China as its protector. The following excerpts reflect Sihanouk's thinking at the time:

1. January 1963: "In order to avoid [-subjugation by Thailand and Vietnam-] the Khmers are ready to ally themselves with anyone. Only the socialist camp seems disposed to protect us from dismemberment. Only it has proposed to help us and says it is ready to offer us guarantees. If our national existence is at stake, how can we neglect this sheet anchor?"⁷⁴
2. In a speech in February 1964, Sihanouk pointed out that: "We do not want to become Red. But some day we will have to ac-

⁷³ Han Suyin and Robert Shaplen, "Portraits of the Prince," in Jonathan S. Grant, et. al. (eds.), *Cambodia the Widening War in Indochina*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1971), p. 74.

⁷⁴ *Realites Cambodienes*, January 18, 1963.

cept it because we will be unable to avoid it, that is, provide we are able to safeguard our territorial integrity... We only want to maintain forever the Khmer nation and the Khmer flag. Most of the countries which have become Red have maintained their national flag and their names are mentioned with great honor in the list of U.N. members."⁷⁵

Sihanouk had always feared the division of his country by Thailand and Vietnam, and this had driven him to seek communist assistance to help him preserve Cambodia. Until he could gain the support of China, Sihanouk did not know that he would be asking the Chinese to assist him in his war for national liberation.

Being a Khmer monarch, Sihanouk ruler in the great tradition of the Khmer monarchy where rulers were expected to care for their people by building roads, rest houses, hospitals, granaries, etc. During his brief reign as a monarch and as Head of the State, he espoused a kind of populism bordering on paternalism. On the other hand, he genuinely distrusted the elites and never viewed them as part of the "people". To him, they had separate class interests which made them potentially dangerous to social harmony. When this elite embraced an anti-national, capitalistic, and anti-people program, Prince Sihanouk chose to be on the side of the greater masses of the Cambodian people. When he finally chose to fight with his people, he lent his prestige to the Cambodian revolution and pushed the war of national liberation to a speedy conclusion.

In his famous declaration of March 23, he said: "I should resign the function as Head of State after our people's certain victory over their enemies and reactionary oppression and their masters—U.S. imperialists. On that very occasion, I will give our progressive youth and working people the possibility of fully assuming the responsibility of national construction and defense with the cooperation of the entire nation..."⁷⁶

Perhaps the left should be given credit for carefully nurturing better relations with the Prince. In the entire career of the known leftists who served under the Royal Government, they supported the Prince's battle for the recognition of Cambodian neutrality. Chau Seng, for instance, who enjoyed the confidence of the Prince, served him until he was forced to flee Phnom Penh to escape the dragnet of Lon Nol in 1967. Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, and Hu Nim served in the Cambodian Ministries and before their disappearance warned the

⁷⁵ N. Sihanouk, *Les Paroles de Sandeek Preah Norodom Sihanouk* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Information, January-March 1964), p. 92.

⁷⁶ *Le Monde*, April 7, 1970. Cited in page 38.

Prince of a "creeping coup" being hatched by the Right. These were but a few of the many leftists who were prominent in the Royal Government who had to flee Phnom Penh toward the close of the 1960's as Lon Nol tightened his grip on the political machinery.

During the Battambang crisis of 1967, the guerrillas distinguished the Prince from the outright reactionaries in the Royal Government. The Prince was never mentioned in their leaflets that circulated in the rebel-infested aread of the Battambang-Siem reap region.

When Sihanouk formed the NUFK and called upon the Cambodian people to take up armed struggle against the U.S. imperialism and the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak regime, the former officials of the Royal Government, Khieu Samphan, Huo Yuon, and Hu Nim, to name a few, immediately responded to his call. Cambodian ambassadors accredited abroad and students from all over the world joined the NUFK either in Peking or in the countrysides of Cambodia. To date there is no finer instance of revolutionary solidarity than that shown by the unmistakably popular base of the forces of social revolution in Cambodia. Confronted with this revolutionary phenomenon, the United States had no choice but to intervene massively (April 30, 1970), only to find out for itself that the gains of its twenty-year counter-revolution in mainland Southeast Asia had eroded overnight.

The NUFK was a powerful magnet that draw progressive forces to its side in the battle for the national liberation of Cambodia. It was able to demonstrate its solidarity in purpose and practice, as well as in program. In conducting the war, the NUFK implemented extensive reforms in the liberated zones — agrarian reforms, political education, extension of medical care and proved its ability to protect the life and property of the population. The liberation forces were so tightly coordinated that in the summer of 1970 the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak regime had to request for U.S. assistance; hence, the American invasion of April 30, 1970. However, by that time the liberation forces had already over-run the countrysides and it was only a matter of months before the final drive to Phnom Penh.

By April 17, 1975 exactly five years after the coup d'etat, the liberation forces reoccupied Phnom Penh, an event which signalled the victory of the NUFK over the U.S. imperialism and its "flunkeys", Lon Nol-Sirik Matak. The swiftness of the Cambodian revolution is a historic record set by the Cam-

bodian revolutionaries considering the long drawn-out national struggles that characterized many other battles in the Third World against U.S. imperialism.

Perhaps, at this point, a question needs to be asked: Where did the NUFK draw its strength? As Yudh-Mitt and other political analysts put it, the answer lies in the NUFK:

“...its correct political line and its correct stand on the problem of unity. It is a broad national democratic movement that rallies around itself all social strata of the Khmer people (workers, peasants, petty-bourgeoisie, national bourgeoisie, monks, patriotic members of royal family, national minorities, intellectuals and all patriotic personages), based on an indistructible worker — peasant alliance which compromise over 90% of the population.”⁷⁷

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