

## **The complex legacy of Norodom Sihanouk**

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By any standards, Norodom Sihanouk was one of the most remarkable political figures of the 20th century. During the course of a lifetime that lasted 89 years, he filled the roles of king, prime minister and chief of state of his country and in doing so took actions for good and bad that had profound effects on the course of Cambodia's modern history.

In his early adult life, he was by his own account a playboy. He was a musician of more than modest talent, but in his other artistic endeavours as a filmmaker his efforts were at best mediocre. In the late 1970s he was, for nearly three years, a prisoner of the murderous Khmer Rouge. It says much about this extraordinary man that such a listing only touches the surface of his many public and private roles.

Above all, and for those who have studied modern Cambodian history, Sihanouk was a subject of controversy. For some, the present writer included, he was a man of many, but flawed, talents, whose personal weaknesses cost his country - dearly. For others, he was the man who by his personal efforts transformed a sleepy kingdom from a French protectorate into a modern Southeast Asian state.

According to this view, whatever faults he may have possessed were negated by his many positive contributions and by the fact, on which all can agree, that he always acted in the belief that he had the good of his country and its people in mind.

Sihanouk's installation as King of Cambodia in 1941 came as a surprise to most contemporary observers. Born in 1922, the only child of Prince Norodom Suramarit and of Princess Sisowath Kossamak, there was little reason in the early years of his life to think that Sihanouk might one day occupy the Cambodian throne.

With a father who was an intelligent but rather lazy man and an amiable womanizer, and a mother who was strong-willed and a staunch supporter of Cambodian traditions, Sihanouk appeared to be just another of the many members of the sprawling royal family who might theoretically be eligible to mount the throne, but seemed, in fact, unlikely to do so. This was so because the reigning king at the time of his birth, King Sisowath, was a member of a different branch of the royal family from Sihanouk. And when Sisowath died in 1927, he was succeeded by one of his sons, King Monivong.

This succession seemed to accord with the prevailing view within the French administration in Cambodia that members of the Norodom branch of the royal family, to which Sihanouk belonged, were less reliable allies than their cousins, the Sisowaths. Indeed, the possibility of a Norodom ever being placed on the throne seemed unlikely to most observers.

Sihanouk's own account of his early life makes clear that he was a lonely child. His parents had little to do with him as his mother followed the advice of an astrologer and handed control of the young prince over to an elderly female relative for the first five or six years of his life. She, in turn, delegated her responsibilities to a female servant, whom Sihanouk later described as being like one of the trusted house slaves in *Gone with the Wind*. As for his father, although he was not unkind to his only legitimate child, he spent little time in his company.

Nevertheless, Sihanouk's parents did not neglect his education, sending him first to the Ecole Francois Baudoin in Phnom Penh, then enrolling him as a student at the Lycee Chasseloup-Laubat in

Saigon, the best-regarded secondary school in French Indochina, where he embarked on a classic French education.

In a telling comment on this period, which gives a sense of his previous loneliness, Sihanouk has stated that it was while he was living in Saigon, boarding with a French customs official of Indian descent, that he made his first friendships. These were with two fellow lyceens, one an ethnic Vietnamese, the other an ethnic Chinese.

Overall, and despite maintaining links with the wider royal family in Phnom Penh during vacations, the picture that emerges of Sihanouk in his mid to late teens is of a vulnerable, even timid individual.

Many years were to pass before there was a distinct change in his personality. It does not take deep psychological insight to judge that his later resentment of contrary opinions to his own had links with this earlier period when he was offered little if any support by his family and had, of necessity, to develop a sense of self-reliance that was mixed with a latent resentment of views contrary to his own.

Sihanouk's life was transformed by King Monivong's death in April 1941. This occurred at a time when Metropolitan France had been defeated by Germany and the pro-Vichy colonial administration in Indochina had only managed to maintain control over Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam by allowing Japanese forces free access to and transit through its territories.

Against this background, the French administration put its doubts about the Norodoms aside and chose Sihanouk to succeed to the throne in the confident conviction that he would be a pliable figurehead, one whose royal status could be used to France's advantage.

His selection came as a total surprise to Sihanouk. As he later put it, "My first reaction was of fear, of fright; I broke down in tears." Five months after Monivong's death, Sihanouk was crowned king. Pictures of this event show a doleful Sihanouk staring wistfully at the camera. It is tempting to conclude that he was reacting to the predictions of the court astrologers that his would be a glorious reign but that, in the end, this would avail him nothing.

To a larger degree than Sihanouk subsequently was ready to admit, his first few years on the throne while the Pacific War was still in progress, justified French calculations. He took his place at official functions as the French required, presided over traditional court ceremonies, and indulged his passions for music and amateur dramatics. He took no part in a major demonstration against the French administration in Phnom Penh in 1942, and it is clear that in most matters that he was entirely ready to follow the guidance of his French mentors.

Yet some hints of Sihanouk's later personality did begin to emerge in the early years of his reign. One was in the control he showed himself ready to exercise over the way in which the royal palace was run. For decades, it had been treated by members of the royal family as a location where they could gather and if necessary live with their servants, making the palace compound something resembling a holding camp. He ended this practice and at the same time did away with the dispensing of opium to royal family members, a practice tolerated by his predecessors.

He also opposed French plans to romanise the Cambodian script and to eliminate education in monastery schools, apparently recognising how deeply offensive these proposals were to most of his compatriots. Nevertheless, in a frank commentary on these war years, he admitted that most of his time was spent in "horse riding, the cinema, the theatre, water skiing, basketball, without speaking of my amorous adventures." His reference to the cinema in this catalogue is notable, since this was a pleasure that was to have political significance in later years.

The next major, dramatic change in Sihanouk's life came in March 1945, when the Japanese mounted a coup de force throughout the countries of Indochina, overturning the French administration and orchestrating the declarations of "independence" in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

In the months between the Japanese action and the return of the French to reassert control over Cambodia, Sihanouk was swept up in events rather than playing a part to shape them. Advised and to a large extent controlled by older conservative Cambodians at this time, Sihanouk slowly came to recognise that his kingly status provided him with the opportunity to play a determining role in Cambodian politics.

By the late 1940s, he had concluded that most of those who were playing a part in his country's politics were either unable to separate policy from personal ambition or, even more seriously in his eyes, were ready to contemplate a Cambodia in which he had no place of power.

With regard to this latter judgment, he was particularly concerned and suspicious of those who had embraced left-wing views. In his eyes, with a considerable degree of accuracy, he saw such men as inevitably lined with the Vietnamese communists, who by this time were engaged in a bitter war against the French.

It was at the end of the 1940s that Sihanouk shook off the range of past constraints that had hindered his becoming the dominant political figure in the country. He showed himself increasingly ready to play an active role in Cambodia's political life and, most importantly of all, to take the lead in working for the country's independence from France.

In embarking on a "Royal Crusade" for independence, an initiative which included appeals to international opinion, brief self-imposed exile from Phnom Penh, and suggestions that the alternative to his program was the likelihood of a communist takeover of Cambodia, Sihanouk both gained independence from France in 1953 and established himself as the leading political figure in the country.

What is more, he was able through his success to marginalise the embryonic communist movement in Cambodia, which, at this stage was essentially working under the direction of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

It was also during this period in the early 1950s that Sihanouk began his long association with future wife and queen Monique Izzi, a relationship that was to last to the end of his life, as she stood by him throughout the many vicissitudes of his career and became his closest confidant and adviser.

Despite these successes, and to his increasing annoyance, he found that there were still some politicians who were not ready to accept that his voice alone should be the one that directed the affairs of the state. Faced with this fact, and relying on a trusted group of conservative advisers, Sihanouk, in March 1955, took the dramatic step of abdicating the throne in his father's favour.

Shortly after he founded and became head of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, the People's Socialist Community, a broad-based movement designed to be flexible enough to encompass a wide range of views always provided it was accepted that Sihanouk's policies were those that were followed.

Sihanouk's abdication was a master-stroke and the five or six years that followed were the most politically productive of his long career. Concerned to transform Cambodia into a modern state, he supported the expansion of education and health services, using his apparently unflagging energy to push programs to completion.

Some of these initiatives resulted in real achievements, but too often what resulted was more form than substance, or had consequences that were far different to those Sihanouk expected.

In education, most significantly, he gave little thought to the results of pushing ever-greater numbers of students through secondary education when there were no jobs for them to fill once they left school. By the early 1960s, there was a growing pool of discontented youth who were ready to listen

to the views of the small but committed group of left-wing radicals who were working clandestinely in Phnom Penh. Among them was the man who went by the name of Saloth Sar, the later Pol Pot.

Sihanouk pursued his domestic agenda against a background of generally difficult, and often poisonous, relations with his neighbours in South Vietnam and Thailand, and the overt suspicion of the United States for his embrace of a “neutral” foreign policy that depended on warm relations with the People's Republic of China.

As the target of two plots against him involving South Vietnam and Thailand in 1959, in one of which there was clear American involvement, Sihanouk was convinced that China alone could act as the ultimate guarantor of Cambodia's security. He saw this as a vital issue, as he increasingly came to believe that the communist government in Hanoi would eventually control the whole of Vietnam.

From 1960 onwards, and despite his readiness to act brutally against left-wing groups in Cambodia itself, he followed policies designed to appease Hanoi. In doing so, he took the fatal steps of turning his back on American aid, which had propped up Cambodia's army, while striking a secret agreement that allowed Vietnamese communist forces to use Cambodian territory as a sanctuary.

From 1966 onwards, the apparent promise of Sihanouk's early years' political dominance had faded. He still was the unquestioned leader of his country, at least in the world of open politics, by this stage wearing the mantle of chief of state, which he had assumed after his father's death in 1960. He had assumed this new position rather than allow any other royal figure to take the throne in case this could lead to a challenge to his position.

But the country's economy was stagnant and there was growing concern among Cambodia's largely conservative political class at the policy of appeasement towards Hanoi that Sihanouk was pursuing.

What is more, Sihanouk was no longer showing his formidable energy in controlling domestic politics as he spent more and more time engaged in the production of full-length “feature films”, which he claimed would show Cambodia's many beauties to the outside world.

While it would be wrong to give too much emphasis to the negative impact that this filmmaking activity had on political opinion, there is no doubt that many elite Cambodians saw Sihanouk's preoccupation with films as an important symbol of his failure to address more serious issues.

Against a background of external threats over which Sihanouk had little if any control, and as war raged next door in Vietnam, Sihanouk sought to achieve a balancing act both domestically and in foreign affairs.

By opting out from the selection of candidates for election to the National Assembly in 1966, he insured that the government that came into power at that time was of a deeply conservative cast and even ready to question some of his policies. And in the field of foreign policy, while still continuing to allow Vietnamese communist forces to make use of Cambodian territory, he sought to repair relations with the United States.

Complicating matters for him by early 1967 was the outbreak of a series of rural revolts against Phnom Penh's authority. While the immediate cause of these revolts appears to have been local discontent with heavy-handed government actions associated with the forced collection of rice, the small Cambodian communist movement rapidly gained control of these insurrections that increasingly posed a threat to the authority of the state.

From 1968 onward, Sihanouk alternated between frenetic activity in the political arena, including authorising the brutal suppression of the rural insurgences, and losing himself in the production of his feature films. His devotion to the latter culminated in the mounting of two Phnom Penh International Film Festivals, in both of which the top award of the “Golden Apsara” went to Sihanouk himself.

While little recognised by the outside world, Sihanouk's grip over the direction of the state was steadily slipping. Most particularly, this was so because those who had previously been his closest allies--the conservative politicians and the members of the officer corps--no longer felt that his policies matched their own interests.

From a very different point of view, a small but significant number of middle class Cambodians had come to the conclusion that only a revolution could solve Cambodia's entrenched social problems and do away with the corruption endemic in Sihanouk's regime. They joined the radical groups already active in the countryside who were making steady progress in recruiting peasant support as they contrasted the indulgent life of the Cambodian elite with the harsh realities of rural existence.

Ironically, the radicals were able to point to the scenes of Phnom Penh high life depicted in Sihanouk's films to buttress their arguments that Cambodia had to be transformed through revolution.

In any event, it was Sihanouk's former allies rather than the growing left-wing movement in the countryside that overthrew him and his regime in March 1970.

Debate still rages over the extent to which there was US involvement in the coup d'etat, but while it is certain that some American intelligence services were privy to the preparations that were being made to depose Sihanouk, the best judgment remains that the coup was very much a Cambodian affair, with Sihanouk's cousin Prince Sirik Matak and an initially reluctant General Lon Nol as the principal plotters.

Sihanouk's downfall was the start of a long period of terrible tragedy for his country. Consumed with a thirst for revenge against those who had removed him from office, Sihanouk joined forces with the Cambodian communist movement that now was working in tandem with the Vietnamese communists to fight the Lon Nol regime in Phnom Penh.

While it is clear Sihanouk realised that he had little in common with the radicals who were now his allies, he appears to have thought that their victory would eventually lead to his being able to play some ill-defined leadership role in Cambodia.

He certainly cannot be accused of associating with those whom he had earlier termed the Khmer Rouge with any recognition of the murderous policies that they would institute once they came to power. Once the Khmer Rouge were in power, from April 1975, their leaders saw no reason to permit Sihanouk any role in the Cambodia that had now started from "Year Zero".

At the end of December 1975, after having visited a number of socialist countries that had recognised the new Democratic Kampuchean regime, Sihanouk returned to Phnom Penh and to three years of house arrest. While it is clear that the conditions of his detention were far from rigorous, he had every reason to fear for his life during this time.

Yet when the Pol Pot regime was overthrown in January 1979, he was briefly ready to defend it at the United Nations in New York after having escaped in the company of senior Khmer Rouge officials just before the invading Vietnamese forces reached Phnom Penh.

While still in New York, and angered that he would not be made head of the Khmer Rouge delegation that remained accredited to the United Nations, Sihanouk engineered his escape from Khmer Rouge surveillance and began a long period of exile, mainly in Beijing, becoming in 1982 head of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea.

In this role, Sihanouk vacillated between long periods of distancing himself from the military and political activity designed to oust Vietnam from Cambodia and brief efforts to exert his control over the disparate elements of the coalition.

When international events combined to bring a settlement of the Cambodia problem in 1991, Sihanouk played an important part in forging an agreement between the various Cambodian factions that enabled the UN to establish a position in Cambodia and to oversee the elections that took place in May 1993. In September of that same year, Sihanouk was once again instated as King of Cambodia.

By the time he was once again recognised as Cambodia's monarch, Sihanouk was beset by a range of illnesses, including cancer. Partly because of this fact, which led to his spending long periods in China for medical treatment, but largely because control of his country's politics was now in the hands of others, most notably Hun Sen, Sihanouk was unable to play a pivotal role in Cambodia's politics in the closing years of his life.

At best, he was able to exercise a degree of moral authority from time to time. But the reality of where political power lay meant that he had become a figurehead rather than a leader.

Sihanouk was never Cambodia, as some foreign observers were inclined to say, but without question he was the most enduring and important figure in his country for over half a century. For all of the good things that he did, or tried to do, his greatest weakness was his inability to recognise that he was not the only person in Cambodia possessed of wisdom.

In speaking of his people as children who had no right to their own ideas, he crippled political development in the years before 1970 and contributed to the tragedies that followed his deposition in that year. As I have written previously, he was a "prince of light and a prince of darkness".

In personalising politics while he held power, he deserved praise for his achievements, but he insured that he would also be judged for the many failures of his long time as Cambodia's leader.

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