

Calling on Cambodia's Sihanouk

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SINGAPORE—Ta Mok, a name familiar to a generation of Cambodians, died in Phnom Penh in the early hours of July 21. In detention since his capture in 1999, the much-feared one-legged former Khmer Rouge military commander died in a military hospital of complications resulting from a long history of high blood pressure, respiratory illness, cardio-vascular problems and tuberculosis.

While there were those who mourned his death, there were arguably legions who were both truly disappointed and deeply frustrated that Ta Mok had taken along with him to the hereafter many dark secrets of the three years, eight months and 20 days of the dreaded Khmer Rouge regime.

His untimely but not unexpected death is without doubt a great loss to the forthcoming Khmer Rouge Tribunal. He could surely have shed at least some light as to why the Khmer Rouge did what it did to its own people, what unfortunate alignment of the planets motivated its frenzied attempt to reinvent Cambodia, and why that exercise went so dreadfully wrong.

Ta Mok is not the only one to have cheated the tribunal of a primary source, of which it has a very limited number. The man accused of being most responsible for the crimes, Pol Pot, Brother No 1, died unceremoniously in suspicious circumstances on April 15, 1998 - at a time when Ta Mok had wrested control of the Khmer Rouge from him.

The loss of such a critical witness as Ta Mok should sound the clarion call to both the United Nations and the Cambodian government that the tribunal should not be delayed any longer and that every resource ought to be marshaled to accelerate the process.

Apart from the possible deaths of the remaining aging Khmer Rouge leaders, there is residual fear in certain circles that some if not most of them who live and move freely in Cambodia will quietly disappear from the country before the trial proper begins early next year. This is not an unlikely scenario.

Media reports last month, for example, that former head of state Khieu Samphan "had packed up his pickup truck in the middle of the night and left town" quickly gained currency and raised anxiety among those who continue to harbor doubts about the tribunal.

A subsequent explanation that Khieu Samphan was merely transporting a bed to his son's house killed further international media interest in the incident but failed to assuage the doubts of the cynics.

Viewed in this context of diminishing primary witnesses, the July 15 offer of former king Norodom Sihanouk, now referred to as Father King, to testify makes fascinating reading and is truly intriguing.

He declared on his website that he did not lack the courage to appear before the tribunal and again pointedly reminded everyone, "My family, my wife's family and many people who supported Norodom Sihanouk were tortured and killed by Pol Pot."

Will Sihanouk testify? It would be difficult for Sihanouk not to steal the limelight should he appear. Even his worst detractors will grudgingly admit that Sihanouk is an extremely astute politician who has been intimately involved with developments in his country for the past half-century. He is both enigmatic and extraordinary. He also knows how to capture attention.

An important point to note here is the firm belief in some quarters that Sihanouk is very serious, and that his was not a frivolous offer. Sihanouk is a man of history, and as he looks back at his colorful and eventful life, he may pause to admit that one of the most universally misunderstood and most trying periods of his life was when he, Queen Mother Norodom Monineath and the present king, Norodom Sihamoni, ended up as virtual prisoners in the palace during the Khmer Rouge rein.

It is entirely possible, or so the belief goes, that Sihanouk, in his sunset years, will view the tribunal, despite his previous criticism of it, as one of the very few remaining vehicles to put across his side of the story for future generations of Cambodians and for the international community.

There is a view that as he is no longer king and since constraints are fewer, he will be more forthright in open court. This is not being fair to Sihanouk. His track record here is clear. Even when he was king and there were numerous constraints, he never lacked in forthrightness.

On the contrary, what has always been uppermost in the minds of those who knew him, friends and detractors alike, was that no one was ever sure what Sihanouk would say. Even some of those who genuinely admire him admit that Sihanouk is indeed unpredictable and fearless - undoubtedly a potent combination.

Others have described him differently.

The highly respected political commentator Milton Osborne titled his book on Sihanouk Prince of Darkness, Prince of Light. In a review of the book, the equally respected Martin Stuart-Fox disagreed with that reference. He gently chided, "The title is an extravagant one. Sihanouk is neither a Prince of Darkness nor a Prince of Light. Such

cosmological/eschatological overtones as these titles convey should not cloud our judgment. What Milton Osborne actually presents us with in this thoughtful and revealing book is a leader whose flaws of character contributed in no small measure to his country's tragic history."

There will be those who will disagree with that observation about Sihanouk but will wholeheartedly accept that the real tragedy of Cambodia was the Khmer Rouge.

Although Sihanouk is not required to appear, and ultimately may not, there is no denying that should he do so, his contributions would be invaluable. There is equally no denying that should he appear, there could well be anxiety among some people and within some capitals.

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