

Cambodia's Forgotten Ex-king

By Denis D. Gray

ASSOCIATED PRESS

September 30, 2005

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia -- Just as the twilight dims the gilded spires of the palace where his remains will rest, Norodom Sihanouk -- king, clown, prisoner, statesman, political escape artist -- is fading from a stage that he dominated for a half-century of periodic triumph amid unrelenting tragedy.

One of the hottest battlefields of the Cold War, Indochina, put his small, impoverished country on the world map. But so did this larger-than-life character -- lovable and detested, gifted and flawed -- who wrested Cambodian independence from France, survived wars and the Khmer Rouge holocaust and, for a time, juggled the superpowers to secure peace for his country.

Now 82, in and out of China for treatment of cancer, Sihanouk has ceased to be an international player, while at home, a young generation eager to plug into the globalizing present has all but relegated him to the history books.

Waning monarchy

The power of the monarchy, almost omnipotent under his rule, is waning fast, and although his accomplishments are firmly embedded in today's Cambodia, so, too, are his failures.

In Sihanouk's place on the throne, which he abdicated last year, sits King Sihamoni, a ballet dancer, lifelong bachelor and political novice. He's an unlikely match for wily strongman Prime Minister Hun Sen, despite being coached by the wiliest of them all — his father, Sihanouk.

It is Hun Sen, peasant-born and a former Khmer Rouge officer, who has replaced Sihanouk, once regarded as semi-divine, at center stage. Democratically elected but an autocratic figure, Hun Sen indicates that he calls the shots at the palace, and nobody dares challenge him.

Beneath flowery, formal words runs an underlying tension and an occasional exchange of public barbs between the two men, with Sihanouk lamenting the state of affairs in Cambodia.

Sihanouk, a prolific writer, has his own Web log, on which he posts sharp opinions on what he considers the deplorable state of Cambodian society and politics, highlighting corruption, deforestation and injustice. As often as not, he blames Hun Sen, in a diplomatically indirect manner that does little to disguise his target.

Among the older generation, especially in the countryside, Sihanouk is still a star who reminds them of quieter, simpler times before the Indochina war.

"I pray in front of his portrait every day for him to be well, to have a long life, because he is so generous to his people," said Ke Khat, a 66-year-old villager.

Each night, she lights incense sticks before dusty posters of Sihanouk and Queen Monineath hanging above her hard bamboo bed.

She and her neighbors at Nikum Preah Kosamak, 50 miles north of Phnom Penh, remember how Sihanouk gave their village aid from his own money, including Ke Khat's house. They recall how Sihanouk, distributing gifts, sobbed when, after returning from his long exile in 1991, he told them how much he had missed "his children."

But the predicament of Cambodia today, some critics say, is in some measure the fault of Sihanouk himself, who had decades and vast powers to make critically needed changes but did not.

Australian historian Milton Osborne said Sihanouk had little interest in reshaping Cambodia's semifeudal institutions. This neglect helped bring on the terrible ultrarevolution of the Khmer Rouge and allowed the ills of Sihanouk's reign to persist into 2005 — rampant corruption, a greedy elite, a dangerous gap between rich and poor.

Although nearly half of Cambodians exist on \$1 a day or less, foreign aid and domestic resources are siphoned off into the pockets of the powerful, with few legal means available to stop it.

Opulent villas of the rich, with new sport utility vehicles in the driveways, sprout in Phnom Penh while poverty, natural disasters and AIDS stalk the have-nots in the slums and villages.

Under Sihanouk, a one-man show from his ascension in 1941 until his ouster in a 1970 coup, popular and democratic institutions could not emerge and reformists weren't allowed to flourish.

"His greatest fault was never to let anyone else but himself give an opinion. He was the classic tree under which nothing could grow. Sihanouk was not Cambodia, but he thought he was," said Mr. Osborne, author of a critical biography, "Sihanouk, Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness."

"Perhaps princes, kings never admit their mistakes and thus fail to teach the coming generations to avoid their mistakes," said Lao Mong Hay, a lawyer and human rights advocate who has tracked Sihanouk's career for decades. "We have not learned the lessons of the past."

Cambodians who know their history still credit Sihanouk with giving birth to the modern nation by peacefully cutting the colonial yoke of France and, for a time, managing to keep the firestorms of Indochina at bay by playing China, the United States and the Soviet Union against one another.

But by the late 1960s, he was losing control at home and abroad.

Increasingly autocratic, he alienated conservatives and persecuted leftists who, like their leader-to-be Pol Pot, were fleeing into the jungles to form the Khmer Rouge.

Sihanouk's ouster by pro-U.S. rightists in a 1970 coup was welcomed by Washington because it removed a geopolitical handicap that it faced in fighting the communists in neighboring Vietnam. It precipitated a savage war between the new, U.S.-backed government and the Khmer Rouge. Five years later, the communist ultras marched into the capital to begin their reign of terror.

His pride deeply wounded, the exiled Sihanouk had sided with the Khmer Rouge, a move some critics say implicates him in the deaths of at least 1.7 million of his countrymen through executions, disease and slave labor.

"History will prove that he shares some of the responsibility for the evils that befell Cambodia," Lao Mong Hay said.

All the same, he ended up being imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge, but was freed. By 1979, the great survivor was back in the limelight, leading a coalition of guerrillas against the Vietnamese troops who had invaded Cambodia to topple Pol Pot and set up a pro-Hanoi regime in Phnom Penh.

Twelve years later, with peace finally attained, he returned home from an exile spent mostly in China, as the United Nations tried to stabilize Cambodia and supervise elections. Seen as a unifying force, Sihanouk was crowned as monarch for the second time.

But he no longer held center stage.

Time passed by

"I think he's a pretty unhappy person," Mr. Osborne said. "I think he had high hopes that once the wars and United Nations peacekeeping mission ended, he would again become a significant player, but this did not happen."

In his youth, the charismatic and prodigiously energetic Sihanouk fielded a palace soccer team, composed music, jested with world leaders and led a jazz band, playing saxophone and clarinet at all-night parties.

But Sihanouk's time has passed.

"The new king doesn't like parties and singing," said Nou Thearoth, a guide at one of the last vestiges of the old Cambodia, the Royal Palace.

She recounts that last year, before heading to Beijing again, Sihanouk staged one of his famous birthday bashes, taking the microphone to sing and dancing with the palace staff.

The spirited mood has vanished. During the day, knots of sweating tourists visit. When dusk falls, seven old Brahmin priests, a half-dozen North Korean bodyguards and a few servants remain with Sihanouk's royal successor in the vast compound.

"He will be buried there," the guide said, pointing to a moundlike Buddhist shrine in a tranquil, tree-shaded courtyard. According to his wishes, Sihanouk's ashes are to be mingled with those of his most-loved child, Kantha Bopha, a daughter who died of leukemia at age 4.

- Phnom Penh correspondent Ker Munthit contributed to this report.