

# “The Role of Cambodia’s Monarchy in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century: The Shift to an End?”

Political Development in Southeast Asia

The Relevance of Royalty: Emblematic, Functional, Dysfunctional?

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## **Abstract:**

After a period of almost two thousand years, Cambodia ceased to be a monarchy after a coup d'état in March 1970. Between 1970 and 1993, the country was ruled by various forms of governments: a US-backed republic (1970-1975), a pro-China communist regime (1975-1979), and a Vietnamese-backed socialist republic (1979-1991). Between 1992 and 1993, the country was under the United National Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). Following the UN-supervised national election in 1993, a new constitution was promulgated. Norodom Sihanouk, who had played significant roles at different times during the previous four decades as king, head of state, prime minister, and leader of resistance movements, was reinstated as King of Cambodia. Article 7 of the Cambodian constitution, however, limits the political power of Cambodia's monarch as follow: “The King of Cambodia shall reign but shall not govern. The King shall be the Head of State for life. The King shall be inviolable.”

In 2004, King Norodom Sihanouk abdicated citing health reasons, although many observers attributed the king’s move to his frustration because of the lack of real political power. He was succeeded by one of his sons, Norodom Sihamoni, who is perceived to be politically inactive and does not share the same level of charisma as his father. Following the death of Norodom Sihanouk in October 2012, some regional scholars have questioned the future of monarchy in Cambodia. Charnvit Kasetsiri (2013) even speculates that “the future of monarchy in Cambodia is bleak.”

Tracing the significance of monarchy and the current political trends in Cambodia, this paper argues that although the institution of monarchy in Cambodia does not entail any real political power, it will not disappear in the foreseeable future. The paper traces the long history of monarchical tradition in the country, negative repercussions of historical attempt to overthrow it, as well as the lack of political incentives to do away with the constitutional monarchy. It argues that Cambodian popular sentiment is strongly in favor of the retention of monarchy and will keep it so for at least several years to come.

**Keywords:** Cambodia’s politics; Sihanouk; Khmer Republics; Hun Sen; constitutional monarchy

## **Short-bio**

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## Introduction

The notion of monarchy in Cambodia has been in its existence for almost two thousands years already but was ceased between 1970-1993. In March 1970, the coup d'état led by General Lon Nol overthrew King Sihanouk and renamed the country "Khmer Republics" afterward. That was the first time in history that Cambodia had actually become a "republic," the government was backed up by the U.S. and its allies during the Cold War. A communist-ruled, Democratic Kampuchea by name which ruled from 1975-1979, left Sihanouk as the prisoner of his palace. A socialist Vietnamese-backed government from 1979 to 1993, was named People's Republic of Kampuchea, left the monarch no role in politics only until 1993 when Sihanouk was reinstated as king under UNTAC occupation to organize the next elections in Cambodia. Apart from its long existence, many scholars question whether the role of monarchy in Cambodia is still relevant since it tends to have been shifting over time and especially after the reinforcement of 1993 Constitution in which "the king shall reign but shall not govern" as specified in Article 7.

Throughout its history, Cambodia has been governed by, theoretically, absolute power figures (with an exception during the colonial era and early years of independence) who often have been harassed by their greedy subordinate leaders (Chandler, 1979, 415). "The monarchy is not only a top administrative body, but it is also a real symbol of legitimacy, sovereignty, and independence of the country." Nevertheless, many foreigners and politicians have used monarchy as a "tool" to obtain their political wills and legitimacy ("Legitimacy and Monarchy in Cambodia," 2008). After the fall of Angkor when the kingship was weakened as a political institution, very little power was to serve the people or to the king they "theoretically revered" (Chandler, 1979, 415). That perhaps was the emergence root of the collapse of major remarkable eras throughout history and especially the Angkorian empire, since it strengthened the opportunity for neighboring countries to attack from behind.

In the earlier period, the central importance of monarchy had been in its consistency. During the Angkorian period which is our remarkable prosperous past, the perceived image of the monarchy had been elevated to a position of "god-king," people considered their king as the divine messenger and so whatever their kings said, they had to obey. After the fall of Angkor, the position of the monarch remained in its great mystically

importance since there were frequent struggles to gain over the throne. The French Protectorate made a good deal by preserving the monarch's position which allowed them to achieve their goals and assert the emergence of their leadership (Osborne, 1966, 9-10).

Despite this fact, this paper will discuss the different roles King Sihanouk played in Cambodia's politics for decades, in many ways filled the traditional role as king, arranged by the French, with disparagement over his political ability. His political charisma impressed scholars who after his death in October 2012 started doubting whether the role of monarchy was still consistent with what it was during the last century or so. While the country was in its republic name in 1970 and since then has gone through various chaotic conditions, the monarchy was ceased and only in 1993 King Sihanouk was reinstated as king of Cambodia with very limited political power on hands which perhaps might be one of the reasons which prompted him to abdicate from his throne in favor of one of his sons in 2004, citing health reasons. The current king, Norodom Sihamoni, does not share the same level of charisma as his father and very minimal political involvements are seen; this paper would argue that the role of Cambodia's monarchy is only a constitutional reign, indeed was firmly listed in the 1993 constitution. However, it would not disappear or be abolished in the foreseeable future because the sense of monarchy has been strongly rooted in people's mind and pride since it would always remind them of their glorious past, namely the Angkorian period and Sangkum Reastr Niyum era as such. Furthermore, it is thought to have political disadvantages to abolish monarchy anyway, which somehow raises a question of what the point to abolish monarchy is while the king power was barely in action. **And indeed, a momentous historical scene in 1970 would have helped to give some evidences to prove how powerful the notion of king was toward the people; even up to the point that they had joined the guerilla force in the jungle in an attempt to have their king back in power. Apart from this fact, we are also aware that the role of monarchy tends to have shifted now and is not as powerful as it used to be.**

### **“Oriental Despots”: Absolute Ruling**

According to the Chinese chronicles (one of the main sources of information that scholars rely on to reveal the civilization of ancient kingdom of Cambodia), the first king of Funan named *Fan-Shih-Man*. Lawrence Palmer Briggs, the American scholar, believed that the word “Fan” might have some correlations with the

Sanskrit suffix “*varman* (protector)” which was then attached to the subsequent kings’ names in Cambodia (Tully, 2005, 9). The last king of Funan, as claimed, was called Rudravarman. The decline of Funan was believed to be the result of the rise of another, more powerful kingdom called Chenla, the invasion of Javanese during the eighth century and enforced “vassal status” on the Khmer kings (Tully, 13-14).

In the early periods, the King was a central figure who had dominant power over his own country’s affairs. If the central figure was strong and powerful, he would lead his country into a prosperous era. Most obviously the Angkorian period was characterized by great building endeavors under the rule of powerful kings. And the opposite is true that when one was weak and was incapable to lead, the country would move towards the state of chaos and would then easily be swallowed up by their neighboring countries or other foreign attacks if the opportunities were to be granted.

Cambodia was a combination of competing kingdoms ranged from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century, ruled by kings whose absolute rules were legitimized through hierarchical caste concepts brought from India. They were strong believers in religious faith and often time led to religious conflict and internecine rivalries. The King had full control over religion practice for the whole nation and as a result, the state religion changed back and forth several times since the kings spent more time engaged in “iconoclasm” which in turn boiled over into civil war (Cambodia History, n.d.).

Not much evidence was left to make it available for us to understand the social conditions during those times and thus our classifications that all Cambodian kings were “oriental despots” would be quiet flaw in a way. David P. Chandler points out in his 1993’s book: *A History of Cambodia* that some of them [the king] left nothing remarkable while some others accomplished over the construction of temples, statues, public works and even left numerous inscriptions as the sources of how life was liked during those times as well as the victory over their defeated rivals and other significant achievements. Their ruling hierarchy and systems also differed from one another: some were centralized, others held “many-layered” administration, while others seemed to have control over a few hundreds followers only. Within Southeast Asia, Cambodia has been several times the mightiest state of all between the ninth and fourteenth centuries in which the monarchs had

assigned constructions covering thousands of hectares including temples, hospitals, roads, and irrigation works (Chandler, 1979, 412).

In the last year of the eighth century, Jayavarman II resolved to move the capital to the north of the Great Lake (Tully, 15). He resided in the Kulen hills where ceremonies were believed to celebrate a cult concerned with that of the *devaraja* concept, a Sanskrit term that translates as “god king or universal monarch” which is probably a cult linking the monarch to Siva (Chandler, 1993, 34). People’s ideas toward their kings were more of a mythology-based rather than their own experiences (Chandler, 1993, 106) and thus had less inclination to be concerned over that whom would then be their kings. People would have accepted the description of royal duties as “to be consecrated, to sacrifice, and to protect the people.” The king was the only political hope among the people, especially the peasants who accounted for the majority, since they even believed that the king could influence the weather (Chandler, 1993, 107). According to the inscription, he found the Angkorian Empire in 802 A.D and could establish the “mighty” civilizations that could rival any other states (Tully, 15). “The largest ruins in the world and the only archaeological site visible from outer space” saw the beginning of its construction during his reign as well -- the temples of Ancient Angkor (Tully, 16). Followed by his reign, the subsequent kings had put much emphasis on the constructions of temples and public work as the religious symbol or even a tomb as argued by some scholars. Jayavarman VII, “a Buddhist king who reigned during the last decades of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the first two of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is regarded as the climax’s reign of the empire.” Angkor empire stretched from Laos to the north, South China Sea to the southeast in modern day Vietnam, Andaman Sea in today’s Myanmar in which Angkor stood at the center of this vast territory (Tully, 27). His name has been remembered throughout centuries, even the most brutal regime in Cambodia history still looked toward the climax of his empire back then and was always regarded as the most prosperous era of all time. Not long after, the empire collapsed due to a combination of political, social, religious, and ecological factors.

The post-Angkorian period showed a remarkable decline in the popularity of kingship, except Ang Duang (r. 1848-1869) and Norodom Sihanouk. Despite the fact that many people struggled to gain power as kings, their roles were not much in existence. After all, during the heyday of Angkor, it was the kings themselves who proposed that they were popular. “The king and his entourage had roles to play in people’s thinking, but

they played central roles only in their own.” Between 1750-1850, perhaps due to the king’s failure to adequately deliver protection and stability that brought his popularity and support among his people down that could trigger rebellions throughout the country (Chandler, 1993, 98) and thus granted the opportunity for neighboring countries to attack. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Cambodia was almost swallowed up by her two antagonistic neighboring countries, namely Siam and Vietnam, in which consequently fortified King Ang Duang to make “diplomatic overtures” to the French emperor in 1853; concerning the counterbalance of power toward the 2 above-mentioned countries, despite Siam’s denunciation. It took the French 10 years to accept the request until Prince Norodom, King Ang Duang’s oldest son, turned to them for support once again after suffering from chaos within the country followed by his father’s death (Tully, 2005, 78-79). Followed by the French protectorate in 1863 onward up until now, the role of monarchy in Cambodia has changed utterly.

### **The Reign over Foreign Rule**

For most of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the monarch was restricted to his palace or lived in exile in Siam or Vietnam; either by choice or by circumstance. They were placed on the Cambodian throne by outside powers who were to serve the new sovereign (Osborne, 1973, 169). From 1600 until the arrival of the French in 1863, Cambodia was ruled by a series of weak kings “beset by dynastic rivalries.” “The 1750s and 1760s were relatively calm as far as invasion from Siam and Vietnam were concerned, but they also saw a series of coups and countercoups by rivals in the royal family that involved assassinations and reprisals” (Chandler, 1993, 96). At some points in time, due to internal rebellions and the struggling for power; the kings sought supports from either Siam or Vietnam to compete for the throne. As Chandler put it:

*“The Siamese and the Vietnamese became the “father” and the “mother” of the Khmer, whose king was referred to as their “child” or their “servant.” In the 1860s, a French official mused perceptively that Siam was Cambodia’s father because its king gave names to the monarch, whereas Vietnam was seen to be the mother because its rulers provided the Khmer with seals of office” (Chandler, 1993, 115).*

King Ang Duong, the last king to rule before the French protectorate, died in 1860. He left the throne being contested by his three sons – Norodom, Sisowath, and Si Votha. Finally, Norodom won the contest and his

coronation took place in 1864 under the “conjunctions” of the Siamese and the French. During his earlier reign, while seeing the country’s sovereignty almost swallowed up by our antagonistic neighboring countries, namely Siam and Vietnam, King Ang Duong decided to seek support from France as protectorate. Even that meant to get rid of those 2 invasions; it was then only to mean that Cambodia would get into a new era of another foreign control.

1863 marked another episode in Cambodia history as the French sailed their gunboat that was anchored within sight. Armed bodyguards stood nearby as Norodom was reviewing the document issued by the French that had been asked by King Ang Duong 10 years earlier for protection. Article 2 of the treaty intensified French control: “His Majesty the King of Cambodia [it reads] accepts all the administrative, judicial, financial, and commercial reforms which the French government shall judge, in future, useful to make their protectorate successful.” It was denoted later on that the king signed it because that was the only way to stay on the throne (Chandler, 1993, 144). Under French protectorate, kings still competed over the throne despite French’s placement. To keep the throne, they had to agree upon under French pressure and to challenge for the throne, they tried to please the French up to their wills even if it meant to be in the name of challenging your own “blood.”

The French left Norodom with no alternative ways of ruling; besides being an arbitrary, authoritarian way. He ruled base on the notion of personal survival rather than by the logical sound of administration. The eruptions of revolts against his rule (and probably against the French’s presence as well) were put down with difficulty by the French with the help of Norodom’s half-brother, Sisowath, who had led the troops alongside with the French in those rebellions and thus the French were increasingly drawn to support him (especially after the outbreak of the nationwide rebellion in 1885 in which the French further undermined Norodom’s authority whom they suspected of supporting the rebellions). Under French pressure, together as Sisowath was in revolt against him, Norodom agreed to promulgate a series of reforms in 1877 as indications of areas of French concern regarding the centralization of their controls. French ordered the abolishment of slavery as so to claim acting on behalf of ordinary people, and more important, to “curb” the power of elites. By doing so, the French were able to justify their interference at every level of Cambodian society which was a major step toward cutting off the relations between the king and his entourage as to restrain his power.

After the nationwide rebellion erupted in 1885, the French began to surround Norodom with Cambodian officials who were not seemingly favoring the throne but rather loyal to them. Major distrusted actions had significantly showed face as his privileges and independence have been reduced by the French. Sisowath was more esteemed with a sign of trust by the French rather than any of Norodom's children, due to the independent-mindedness of many of his sons. Prince Yukanthor (Norodom's favorite son), while he was in France, sought publicize the French "injustice" in Cambodia by hiring the French journalist to press his case when he declared, "You have created property [in Cambodia] and thus you have created the poor." While Norodom was then perceived as weakened, a significant shift of the balance of power had encountered. Those high-ranking officials, who previously depended on his approval, were quickly showed their trends. Loyalty to monarchic institution had been eroded under various foreign rules throughout our history while it was weakened as a political institution.

After his death, the monarchy institution in Cambodia was a "watershed," as kings were handpicked by the French. It was from this period onward that the French showed remarkable involvements into Cambodia's political affairs. Cambodian high-ranking officials (including the kings as well, most of the time) played roles as a subordinate, ceremonial role, and those at the lower level were "underpaid servants" of colonial power. Sisowath, Norodom's successor, had favored the French (and even opposed his brother) since during his half-brother's reign, in an attempt to earn trust and succeeded the throne afterward. After his coronation, his relations with the French remained strong which in turn led to his remarkable achievement that was to regained those 3 provinces that had been lost to the Thai; as the French saw very little benefits generated from it (Chandler, 1993, 142-150). Sisowath's frequent efforts were to ensure that his son would succeed him on the throne. However, the French also have a critical view of whom the successor might be. Those who really had shown fears and difficulties of losing the protectorate would have caused the progress and calm of Franco-Cambodian relations. On the other hand, for "those who offered no threat to French control were usually seen as given to laziness or as insufficiently qualified for the role of monarch" (Osborne, 1968/1969, 112). Monivong, his favored son, succeeded him on the throne in 1927.

Regardless of their private wishes, the French recognized the important sense of monarchy. So what they should have concerned at the moment was to ensure that the next successor was to be the one who would not



contradicted with their administrations. In fact, there were numerous controversies of whom to be selected as king, particularly over dynastic rivalry which perhaps was the added factor contributing to internal instability as well. At last, Sihanouk was perceived as the best alternative who would then “heal the rivalry wound” since his descent through both branches of the royal family – Norodom and Sisowath. Yet, he was only 19 years old when he was crowned as king in 1941 which allowed us to suspect that his young age might be another added factor in which the French perhaps believed that he would be a malleable figure to serve their wills (Osborne, 1973, 179). France’s decision upon chosen Prince Sihanouk to be crowned as king had more to do with the degree to which a monarch would be easily directed in France’s interest rather than the issue of “dynastic rivalry.” However, the problems of dynastic rivalry had also risen some remarkable moments.

*“Under the French, contentious politics were forbidden”* (Chandler, 1991, 4).

### **Beyond merely a "King"**

Cambodia, as many other countries of the region, in turn had the tradition of absolute ruling which had evidently shown in the pre-colonial times (kings had in theory been absolute), simply because sharing power of a loyal opposition or of national elections have not been in favor since the start. Between 1947 and 1958, Democratic party based among “Cambodia’s educated elites” was probably inspired by the traditional French parliamentary systems which perhaps have taken Cambodia toward constitutional monarchy as well as multiparty politics. In the first four decades of the twentieth century, the throne remained as a major desire among the royal family, despite of its unknown exact-representation (Osborne, 1973, 181). Nevertheless, to many of the members of the royal family, still viewed the throne as an institution holding “mystical attraction, the ultimate dignity, and honor” to which many of them would have aspired (Osborne, 1973, 182).

### ***The King of Lead***

“First King, later Prince, then King again and finally, [today], King Father” (Chandler, 2008). A monarch

who was not merely a “king,” had played an active role in Cambodia politic for decades. Since the formation of Funan until the emergence of French protectorate era, the king had theoretically been absolute. Nonetheless, the [king] roles tend to have been shifted over time with the cause of uprising as well as internal instability. Under foreign rules and during French Protectorate, kings were under foreign commands and worked as their subordinates. Sihanouk, unlike the rest, has proven the French that they were wrong soon after his coronation in 1941. Upon his accession to the throne, King Sihanouk was the “inheritor of both the adverse and the advantageous results of the French presence in his country” and until his reign that the monarchy’s status institution probably stood higher than it had for centuries (Osborne, 1968/1969, 114).

“Prince Sihanouk’s later extended commentaries on the Cambodian monarchy are marked by his desire to emphasize the politically unifying aspects of the institution in post-independence Cambodia” (Osborne, 1973, 181). The designated king was thought to be “an inexperienced, music-loving, flamboyant young man” whom the French would considered to be the putty in their hands. In spite of that, he had succeeded in granting full independence to Cambodia in 1953 and played dynamic roles ever since until 1993. On March 9, 1945, Japanese military forces moved to disarm French units across Indochina, took control over the peninsula in a sudden (Chandler, 1991, 14) and later encouraged King Sihanouk to declare independence from France. The self-declaration on 13 March 1945 was just a short-lived independence granted because after the war, the France returned to rule over Cambodia again. Sihanouk decided to publicize his royal crusade for independence in 1953 to the international level, after France turned dead ears toward him and even threatened to have him replaced if he still showed his uncooperative mood. He decided to risk his future as king by campaigning against the French. Full independence was granted and November 9, 1953 was proclaimed as the Independence Day for Cambodia nation. His long career stood firmly on two aspects: neutrality and territorial integrity. In 1954, he declared Cambodia neutral in Geneva (So, 2012, 2) without favoring the left or the right wing, neither the socialist nor the capitalist, respectively.

In 1955, he abdicated from the throne in favor of his father, King Suramarit, but more importantly, to compete for political power at the ballot box; that was to participate fully in his country political affairs. He realized that the massive victory over the election derived from the colossal degree of loyalty and support of

the people, yet that would not necessarily ensure the high degree of national unity. He was convinced that what would be essential for a modern nation is to “revolutionize the monarchy and link the people to the concept of the government which combined both conservatism and social and economic reform” (Smith, 1967, 355). A landslide victory with his political movement, dedicated to modernize Cambodia and bring the country to prosperity – Sangkum Reatr Niyum, which promoted his charismatic figure until 1970.

Sihanouk has always shown strong commitment upon his control of politics in Cambodia and thus unwillingly to surrender power. He has proposed “a deep preoccupation with the question of succession,” in which he revealed his concern and discussed the future of monarchy’s role in Cambodia affairs even before his father’s death in April 1960. Indeed, he was not ready to see the throne being occupied when his father, King Suramarit, passed away (Osborne, 1968/1969, 118). He, thus, became the head of state; receiving the title of prince again rather than king. More than a decade after his abdication, he continued to dominate the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government. As his country’s chief diplomat, its “foremost” political thinker, and its formater of ideology (Smith, 1967, 353); he is denoted as a great-fascinating political figure of Cambodia history.

### ***The Threats of Neutrality***

Cambodia was left independent without any foreign interference, moving through peaceful and prosperous era under the umbrella of the *Sangkum*. However, the degree of Cambodia neutrality was at its peak; at least freed Cambodia from Indochina wars for the past remarkable years. It was then caught between the forces “beyond” its control. The US was fighting the communist which dragged Cambodia into the Vietnam war, spoiled the stance of neutrality and the state of being at peace (So, 2012, 3).

May, 8th, 1954 marked the opening of the Geneva Conference with delegations from the United States, France, Britain, the USSR, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Cambodia, Laos, the (communist) Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) – DRV’s anti-communist rival from the South; aimed to negotiate settlements over the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts. Standing on the stance of neutrality, Sihanouk maintained that he was neither pro- nor anti-communist; and thus refused to be an ally of any of the two superpowers during the Cold War. This neutrality, however, restricted

Cambodia toward major political stances as ensuring the complete withdrawal of the Viet Minh and disarming the Khmer People's Liberation Army (KPLA) as well as forbade Cambodia from entering into military alliances with other countries. As time passed by, the term "neutrality" only existed in theory and principle in which the king then tended to have acknowledged it all by himself. This in turn, was not welcomed by the US. Some agreements such as to dismiss any of the US military bases that would set up on Cambodian soil while relations toward the PRC and the DRV grew significantly, initially showing a scenario of threatening to withhold all aids from Sihanouk's regime. Not long after that in 1955, the US changed its track; aided even more military assistance and pledged Cambodia for her neutrality and sovereignty. After attended the Bandung Conference in the same year, Cambodia received more economic aid on more favorable terms from the communist bloc countries than those of the Americans and their capitalist alliances (Tully, 2005). It was not so much surprising when Cambodia economy started to shift afterward during the Sangkum which was perhaps one of the reasons that led to the 1970 overthrow.

For the next 15 years, US policy was in a way to bribe, persuade, or direct Cambodia into the Free World as a "front-line state" in the war against communism while also bringing pressure to bear indirectly to Cambodia via its Southeast Asian "satellites" and SEATO partners, the Philippines, the Republic of Vietnam and Thailand in particular.

### ***Behind the Sangkum***

To many Cambodian people, both the elder and new generations, the *Sangkum* period was another prosperous era discerned in history other than the Golden Age – the Angkor period. The remaining documentary videos and films, produced during that era, have played an important role in stereotyping the overall image of the society back then. Not surprisingly, together with his charismatic characteristics and popularity that might perhaps act as the supplementary factor, to lift and strengthen these stereotypes for decades to pass. Besides the image of rapid developments in almost every sector of the society which have been portrayed in those documentaries, are there some hidden behind-the-scene-episodes forgotten already? The establishment of the *Sangkum* had already shown more malevolent effect on modern Cambodian history since it was later signified that Sihanouk had shown no attraction to democracy since the earlier stage. In

1952, with French collusion, he dismissed the popularly elected Democratic Party government and jailed their leaders without trial. The reason behind that was because, chances are, that government aimed to make Cambodia a constitutional monarchy which in turn would have consigned him to a largely ceremonial role. The overtly leftist republican later attracted very limited popular support, particularly in 1953. Upon independence, Sihanouk still did not support multi-party democratic government but instead sought personal power.

The propaganda of the Sangkum was to unify the country but in fact, it was to eliminate all political opposition, or drive it underground, while the power was concentrating solely on the hands of Sihanouk as legitimate. Its structure derived from the “mandala” model of Angkor in which the power of the kings rested on the loyalty of regional rulers and court officials, in return for favors attributed to the benefits of the king in the form of delegated administrative authority and status. Likewise, educated urban Cambodians flocked to join the Sangkum in an attempt to facilitate access to the benefits granted to government employment and contract, granted chances for their children to have entry to the top schools and universities as well as oversee scholarships and further contract employments as government officials. At the same time, peasants supported the Sangkum because it was led by their meritorious king, though they got little in return. Ironically, it was the failure of the education system that brought everything into another tragic period marked in history – Sihanouk’s political demise. Urban supporters expected their children to be granted a position after their graduation from universities. Though, the awarded degrees turned out to be of poor quality and the standard fell as a result; in numbers too large to be employed in government jobs. Nonetheless, the bright and ambitious avenues tend to be handed to politically well-connected officials, passed on to their children. As popular dissatisfaction grew, Sihanouk turned to film making and arts, which was once the career that he had belonged to. For him, these should be another aspect to be taken into consideration as a showcase toward modernity but in the process, he turned his eye off the political arena and was destroyed by all of these weaknesses which prompted people to lose trust in him in a sudden (Jelders, 2012). Meanwhile, the ability of clients also upraised that was seen as the result of the 1970 coup to overthrow him.

### ***The Consequences***

In 1967, Pol Pot launched guerilla operations against the royal government but was bloodily put down. Middle class began to crumble against Sihanouk's rule due to the employment opportunities being offered was not as expected. Although the relation with the US was restored in 1969, the right wing turned against him as the result of the 1970 military coup. In March 1970, Sihanouk was deposed by a coup d'état staged by Lon Nol while he was on an official visit in the USSR. He has consistently remained a neutral figure for his country during the Cold War, and thus accused the CIA of being the promoter of the coup. "To him, the coup was the most decisive chapter in his war with the CIA, a war which dated back to 1955." Allen Dulles, director of the CIA, turned up to Phnom Penh one day and proved that Cambodia was about to fall to Communist aggression and then asserted Sihanouk that the only way to save the country was to accept the protection of SEATO. Sihanouk replied: "Cambodia wanted no part in SEATO. We would look after ourselves as neutrals and Buddhists." As he had put it:

*"I am not and will not become a communist, for I disavow nothing of my religious beliefs or of my nationalism. But I know the Khmer people, the Vietnamese people and the other peoples of our region too well to believe that they can accept having the interests of reactionary, fascist, militarist and corrupt leaders imposed on them or accept having a great white power insist that for their own sakes they should take dictatorship in place of democracy and the satellization of their country in place of national independence"* (Sihanouk, 1970, 5).

After the coup was successful in overthrowing Sihanouk in 1970, massive U.S.-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia no longer needed any diplomatic relations. Indeed, "the B-52 diplomacy took over" and threatened the lives of millions of Cambodians especially along the border while Sihanouk now was "out of reach of the CIA" and lived in exile in Peking with full dignity treatments of a head of state (Dinh, n.d, 56).

He decided to fight back by organizing a resistance. With China's backing, he decided to join his former enemies, the Khmer Rouges. It was later known that China supported the Khmer Rouge in order to weaken Vietnam, which was backed by the Soviet Union. Sihanouk received warm support from China due to the link of Sino-Soviet rivalry (Sodhy, 1994-1995). He launched an appeal to the Cambodian people to the armed struggle while living in exile in Beijing, took the lead of a government (*GRUNK*—The Royal Government of National Union of Kampuchea) and an army (*FUNK*—National United Front of Kampuchea, mainly composed of communists). Five years after a horrific civil war, he later returned to Phnom Penh, a

ghost-town, emptied of its inhabitants, as nominal Head of State of the Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge-led regime). He then broke up with the Khmer Rouge in 1976 as no real political power was significantly shown but by that as it may, he could save his life and was protected by the Chinese. He remained in internal exile under house arrest with the comfort of his royal palace (Chandler, 2008).

During the Vietnamese's invasion in 1979, PRK (People's Republic of Kampuchea) was installed in as the puppet government. But after the invasion, its legitimacy gained awareness and recognitions only among few countries, largely due to Cold War politics. Instead, Prince Sihanouk was recognized by the international community as leading a government in exile; representing FUNCINPEC led by his son, Norodom Ranariddh. FUNCINPEC, together with Son Sann (a Cambodian politician representing a "resistance faction" known as Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces), and the Khmer Rouge united to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea. Sihanouk held Cambodia's U.N. seat in aggregation with the Khmer Rouge during the remainder of the PRK regime (Berman, 1996).

### **1993 Constitution: The King shall *reign* but shall not *govern***

The most brutal Democratic Kampuchea regime marked in history alongside with the Vietnamese-backed Hun Sen government after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, forced Cambodia into isolation which had only been a kickoff after the Paris Peace Accord in 1991 and was then led to the establishment of UNTAC to organize Cambodia's national election in 1993. UN occupation in Cambodia was the most comprehensive one ever. 16,000 troops and 5,000 civil administrators were deployed to operate at a full strength throughout Cambodia to fulfill the mandate assigned by the Paris Peace Accord, as \$3 billion were spent on the whole enterprise, yet, its legacy remained controversial (Brinkley, 2011). The process was to re-aligned all formerly antagonistic political parties on the basis led to the formation of provisional government, the development of the constitution, and the inauguration of a new Royal Government (Frost, 1994). UN's mandate was to have all political parties to compete over the ballot box in 1993, and the main "mileposts" along that process were the disarmament of four factions and the repatriation of thousands of refugees from Thailand (Longmuir, 2007/2008). The four stood-out parties include the **CPP** (the Cambodia People's Party, led by formerly Khmer Rouge's cadre – Hun Sen), **FUNCIPEC** (the National United Front for an

Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia; led by Sihanouk's son – Prince Ranariddh), **BLDP** (the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party, led by Son Sann) and the **Khmer Rouge**. Nonetheless, only two of which were believed to be the main contender, competing in ruling the country.

On one side, the CPP was campaigning for the liberation of the country from the brutal regime of the Khmer Rouge and bring peace back to their people. Hun Sen questioned whether any of the parties could establish their own administration to replace the SOC (State of Cambodia) government. As a political tactic, he criticized both FUNCINPEC and BLDP of aligning with the Khmer Rouge which perhaps thought to be effective since people have always remembered what that regime was like. He claimed to outlaw and defeat the Khmer Rouge, militarily, if he won the election. On the other side of the coin, Prince Ranariddh argued to secure peace and stabilize the country; attacked CPP for corruption practices and the significant flow of Vietnamese immigrants. Perhaps thought to be another effective political strategy to attack their rival since in Cambodia notion, the Vietnamese have been one of our former historical rivals for centuries. Even if they were the one who had liberated our country from the Khmer Rouge, they were less likely to be regarded in a good will while to some people, 1979 marked another Vietnamese occupation in our history and thus they were forced to withdraw their troops in 1989 accordingly. Notably, Prince Ranariddh emphasized strongly that a vote for FUNCINPEC is effectively a vote for his father, Prince Sihanouk (Frost, 1994).

Sihanouk, a charismatic political figure since his coronation in 1941 until 1970 when he was overthrown, is still buried deeply in people's heart. He no longer has an active role to play in his country political affairs, if not *restricted* to play any roles at all. At least, his name and reputation allowed his son, namely Prince Ranariddh, to use it as a political weapon to compete over the ballot box and won the election. People still attached strong confidence and belief toward the monarchical role as political institution, perhaps due to the prosperity of monarch's lead during the *Sangkum* that allowed them to figure things out in the same way. People even told themselves to forget the fact that Sihanouk had called for arm struggle to join the Khmer Rouge in the jungle in order to have him back in power and thus elevated the Khmer Rouge success, led to what was known today as the "3 years, 8 months, 20 days" with the loss of millions of lives and the country started to rebuild again almost from scratch. But was Sihanouk the only one to blame? As Verghese Mathews put it (2006):



*“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. [...] Sihanouk is neither a Prince of Darkness nor a Prince of Light.” (2)*

### ***King as the arbitrator?***

After the first election under UNTAC’s supervision, Prince Ranariddh was appointed first prime minister while Hun Sen was appointed second prime minister. Surprisingly, the Provisional National Government drafted a constitution establishing a liberal democracy and constitutional monarchy; and that Prince Sihanouk was made to be king, “to reign but not to rule” (Berman, 1996). FUNCINPEC won, according to the number of ballot and seat, but CPP refused to accept the result. Prince Sihanouk emerged in as the arbitrator, led to the formation of the first and second prime minister. The role as constitutional monarch that he had refused to accept back in the mid-twentieth century; now has clearly shown its face once again. And this time, he could not refuse it anymore since this was the only way for him to interact, at least slightly, in his country’s affairs. So it seems as if he has already admitted that his role could not return to what it had been. Placing Ranariddh to run FUNCINPEC party just seems to be Sihanouk’s main actor, on his behalf, to be in charge of Cambodia politics and it has obviously shown that Ranariddh could not perform a role as active and as fascinating as his father once had.

A real fighting broke out mid-June 1997 between the two bodyguard units, Hun Sen’s and Ranariddh’s, which was known widely as the 1997 coup. Hun Sen staged a bloody coup against his rival and won a victory over the battlefield. Consequently, this country was then ruled by “strongman” whom the US scholar Stephen Heder had once described as “both a competence political administrator and a ruthless political criminal.” Not surprisingly, the real power was in the hands of Hun Sen despite Ranariddh being the first prime minister who had actually won the election. It could have been figured out that monarchy institution could have been less likely to be confronted on the political arena since the time King Sihanouk was overthrown. Perhaps King Sihanouk knew that he himself could not engage in politics as actively as he used to, since his power was restrained, but probably also due to some psychological effects he had encountered

that took place during the Cold War, turned him into film making instead. It was clear that he could not restore his power even if he was reinstated as king, reigned constitutionally, in 1993. The country has been ruled by our “strongman” since then, the longest serving prime minister in Asia and one of the longest in the world.

### **Abdication in 2004: Why Sihanouki?**

Hun Sen and Sihanouk relationship was a rocky one when he was on the throne and especially after 1997 when our strongman began to dominate Cambodia affairs and undercut Sihanouk’s influence. His abdication in 2004 left us with major stances to be debated. Though health reasons were mentioned, many believed one of the reasons was the fear that Hun Sen would demolish the monarchy when the quarrel became heated during his reign. While stepping out of the throne, the monarchical institution wielded no real power since then. But experts point out that its presence would still be a respectful institution among people due to the reverence Cambodians have given to the royal family.

A 60-year-old King Sihanouki, a one time ballet dancer and cultural ambassador, is seen as completely apolitical and has given little problems to Hun Sen or his senior official. A 61-years-old Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has said to stay in power for other decades, thus, would seem likely to keep the monarch. Milton Osborne, a Southeast Asian expert, revealed that despite the fact that Hun Sen has shown occasional highly critical comments on some members of the royal family, there seems no significant way in which he will act against the monarchy in its present form (Ponnudurai, 2012).

As Harish C. Mehta had argued in his book “Warrior Prince: Norodom Ranariddh, Son of King Sihanouk of Cambodia” published in 2001, Sihanouk did not wish to delay his abdication process due to his failing health as so to the fears for the well being of his wife. It was because of this fear that he chose Sihanouki in the hope that he would take care of his mother. The monarchy was not hierarchy, although a future king would be elected by the Royal Council of the Throne, Sihanouk was just in an attempt to have his request being respected as no power could be wielded over the throne council. Sihanouk revealed that both Hun Sen and Chea Sim preferred to see Sihanouki enthroned but the crucial reason behind was unsaid. The

acceptability was just because Sihamoni posed no threat of becoming an alternative power center (177). As

Milton Osborne pointed out:

*"If he were to try to take a political role I have no doubt Hun Sen would act to diminish him and the monarchy generally almost immediately. Which is why he is effectively a prisoner in the palace. He could very well be the last king of Cambodia"* (Gray, 2011).

### **A Prisoner of his Palace?**

Sihamoni does not seem to have a “say” in the country affairs. Deep inside, he seems to be no more than a *holder* or a *protector* of the throne, based upon his father’s wills. A remark from Minister of Information, Khieu Kanharith, who argued that:

*"The reason why some people say the king is without power, a prisoner in the palace, is because they compare him to the King-Father. This is wrong. Sihanouk was also head of state involved in politics. The current king is playing the classic role of protecting Cambodian unity, tradition, religion. The king will survive if he is firmly committed to this constitutional role."* (“Norodom Sihanouk: Last of Cambodia’s powerful kings,” n.d.)

The king rarely makes public remarks to address any sorts of political issues and thus his words tend to offer rare insight into his position of the country. But when he did during his father cremation period to address 400 prisoners who had been released, it was Prime Minister Hun Sen whom the king told to those freed prisoners to express their gratitude to, due to the fact that the king only has the constitutional power to grant amnesty (Meyn, 2013). However, it significantly showed that his role has been dominated and more like a figurehead, instead.

During current political deadlock, the king only emerges as the arbitrator to soften political instability between the two parties who had won the seats in the National Assembly. Rewind back to the time during election campaign, every party stood firmly on their stance to preserve the monarchy institution as a political weapon, alerted to people of their concern and their reverence toward our monarch. Despite the fact, there would not be any differences of the king role though. And every politicians or any political parties know for sure that by abolishing the monarchy, social unrest might present as during Lon Nol period when we became the Republic. The king’s legacy, so as Sihanouk, remained deeply in people conscience; a great devotion to join the armed struggle in the jungle (by not acknowledging that they were communists) with an attempt to

have him back to power. As a matter of fact, the current government would have no advantages to abolish the monarchy anyway; as long as the monarch is not an obstacle in their political power dominations.

### **Royal Funeral: Metaphor of Country's Power Politic?**

Prince Thomico, a nephew of and former aide to the late King Father Norodom Sihanouk, said that the royal family did not have a say in organizing our former king funeral processions. Many observers argued that the CPP used this cremation as a way of consolidating its hold on the country which was watched by thousands of people who flocked to the city to pay their last respect before the king's body was cremated. A historian Henri Locard said that the scale of the funeral (was released to have cost around \$1.2 million in public funds) was not the momentum behind the monarchy but in fact, it portrayed own accomplishments of the current ruling CPP and as a bid to combine [Hun Sen] legacy to that of the former king (Meyn, 2013).

For the past week, the country's state-owned and government-aligned television networks have run the documentary programs of Sihanouk-era projects in agriculture and manufacturing between regular news reports of the CPP's own accomplishments in developing the country. Dr. Sok Touch, a political analyst, said that our prime minister wants to show the link, if not comparison, between today-regime's developments and back then the achievements of Sihanouk-regime.

### **Conclusion**

Cambodia has been governed by theoretically absolute monarchical rulings since its origin until earlier period of French Protectorate. Taking into account the shifting of their roles during different periods and especially their reign under foreign rules, the monarchical institution has stood high for centuries passed until today, yet their contemporary political role is seemingly insignificant. King Sihanouk, a charismatic king who had been an active political figure for decades, is the father of his country independence, as the head of state, and the leader of another prosperous era marked in its history – the Sangkum. His legacy still bury deeply in people's heart. Due to the fact that his son, King Sihamoni, does not share the same level of

charisma as his father in term of engaging in political roles, thus lead us to question whether the role of monarchy is still relevant.

Since his coronation in 2004, Sihamoni seems to have enjoyed the comfort environment of his palace but that is all. Political affairs are widely dominated by our *strongman*, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ministers. In spite of what was written in the constitution, Sihamoni emerges only as the arbitrator during the current political deadlock but his real power remains in its controversy. No concrete political decisions have been made by him, besides cooling down both side of the rivals and encourage further cooperation. The king was set to protect the throne rather than to hold any political power since the start. By placing someone who would have been so active in politics, might not perhaps guarantee the existence of the monarchical institution as well. Despite his apolitical stance, monarchical institution would not be abolished in the foreseeable future; due to the strong reverence people are given to their king and unlikely political threats that the monarch would impose anyway.

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