An Enigma to Washington:
The Political Ideology of Cambodia's Norodom Sihanouk (1945-1970)
Andrew Wickersham

"Faced with these pressures [from Thailand, Vietnam, and China] pulling him in many directions, little wonder Sihanouk's responses resemble those of [a] small, intelligent trapped animal desperately seeking [an] exit from [a] trap, dashing back and forth all directions, and keeping up continuous high-pitched shrieking."[1]

This belittling and overtly racist characterization of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and his foreign policy came directly from the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia in communication with the State Department in 1964.

The United States Department of State, analyzing Sihanouk's policies through the lens of European political thought, consistently misunderstood the ideology of Cambodia's head of state. A nationalist without a nation-state, a self-styled populist steeped in privilege, and a conservative opposed to capitalism, Sihanouk's politics eluded the U.S. State Department's comprehension. While often adapting the guise of other ideologies out of necessity, Sihanouk's underlying politics remained unchanging. Sihanouk ultimately can be understood as a traditional Cambodian monarch committed to preserving Cambodian independence and his own political power.

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In the heated debates on the nature of Sihanouk's ideology, too many historians have focused on the superficial alliances that Sihanouk formed from time to time to ensure his survival. David Chandler, a former U.S. State Department official, viewed Sihanouk as a leftist, anti-American, Chinese puppet. While occasionally recognizing that Sihanouk did in fact adhere to a policy of neutrality, Chandler emphasized that in both foreign and domestic policy Sihanouk pursued a left-wing agenda. He argued that within Cambodia, Sihanouk supported a leftist media and education system, conducted a systematic campaign of terror against the pro-American right, and pursued economic reforms with "the intention

[1] POL 27-13 CAMB, Telegram From the Embassy in Cambodia to the Department of State, 26 Mar. 1964, in Patterson, David S. and Edward C. Keefer (Eds.), *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968: Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs. Vol. XXVII,* (Washington, 2000), 289.

of making Cambodia into a genuinely socialist state."[2] Michael Vickery, on the other hand, stressed the right-wing tendencies of Sihanouk's regime. He rejected the notion that "members of the extreme right were progressively confined to honorary posts." He demonstrated that most of the members of the pro-American Lon Nol regime had held important roles in Sihanouk's government since 1955.[3]

Sihanouk's ideology cannot be grasped apart from an understanding of Cambodian monarchic history. From its origins during the Classical Angkor Period (AD 802-1431), the Khmer kingship was an office infused with religious symbolism and its occupant was a divine figure. In 802 C.E. Jayavarman II became the first king of the Khmer Empire. Upon his coronation at the Mountain of Indra, King of the Gods, Jayavarman took the title "The God who is King."[4] Fitting with his divine status, the kings of the Khmer Empire constructed enormous public works projects, including palaces and enormous temples, such as the iconic Angkor Wat.[5] These *wats* were representations of the Mountain of Indra.[6] In addition, the king was expected to distribute patronage in a pre-modern form of social welfare to the Khmer people, understood by the monarch to be his children. As a result, some of the most innovative of the kings' building projects included reservoirs and irrigation networks necessary to support the kingdom's rice production.[7]

There was no indication that Sihanouk understood the function and duties of the institution of kingship any differently than his predecessors. Sihanouk, by all accounts, was a workaholic. He personally attended the opening of numerous hospitals, factories, and irrigation systems in Cambodia.[8] In undertaking these projects, Sihanouk ensured his legitimacy by carrying out one of the primary duties of kingship. There was no indication either that Sihanouk viewed the people any differently than the ancient kings of Angkor. He routinely referred to them in his addresses as "my children."[9] He also showed no reticence in promoting a cult of personality about himself. He hated being isolated from his people, and early in his reign the peasantry responded with the

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[2] David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia,* (Philadelphia, 2008), 235.
[3] Michael Vickery, "Looking Back at Cambodia, 1942-76," in Kiernan, Ben and Chanthou Boua (Eds.), *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942-1980,* (London, 1982), 100.
[4] Michael D. Coe, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization,* (London, 2003), 97-99.
[5] *Ibid*., 107.
[6] *Ibid*., 119.
[7] *Ibid*., 101.; see also Keith W. Taylor, "The Early Kingdoms," in Tarling, Nicholas (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Vol. 1. Pt. 1*., (Cambridge, 1999), 158-159.
[8] Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, (Honolulu, 1994), 132.
[9] *Ibid.*

traditional displays of adoration characteristic of earlier times.[10] From the way Sihanouk spoke of the people, he clearly regarded himself as a populist, and yet few people could have been further removed from the realities of ordinary life in Cambodia. In short, the very notion of what embodied Cambodia had changed very little from the Khmer Empire to the reign of Sihanouk. As one American journalist wrote: "Cambodia is Sihanouk."[11]

Sihanouk remained, throughout his life, adamantly committed to this form of Cambodian conservatism with its emphasis on Buddhism, political patronage, and the unabashed preservation of power. Though well acquainted with European political thought, Sihanouk proudly rejected foreign ideologies. Concerned only with establishing a truly independent Cambodia with himself as its king, Sihanouk did not care, in his own words, "a rap about political economy, political science or other subjects."[12] As he proudly declared: "I have not read any of these [kinds] of books."[13] To U.S. State Department officials unfamiliar with non-European political thought, Sihanouk appeared apolitical, "irrational and unpredictable."[14] However, his rejection of partisan politics in the 1950s and his dealings with right-wing and left-wing politicians during the 1960s demonstrated Sihanouk's unwavering adherence to political objectives beyond the limited conceptions of the State Department.

Cambodia, however, could not remain forever isolated from European political thought. Since 1863 Cambodia had been a part of the French Empire.[15] However, within a year of Sihanouk's ascension to the throne in 1941, the Japanese had taken control over the French Empire in East Asia as the Second World War engulfed the region.[16] While France regained control of Cambodia after the war, the introduction of European political ideologies into Cambodia during this period would prevent the return of the status quo. As a result of the rise of Khmer political awareness, the Electorate Act was passed in 1946, legalizing political parties.[17] Three significant political parties emerged as a result: the

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[10] *Ibid.,* 133.
[11] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia,* 239.
[12] Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 135-136.
[13] *Ibid*., 136.
[14] FE/SEA Files: Lot 63 D 73, 2-E, Memorandum From the Director of Intelligence and Research (Cumming) to the Secretary of State, 21 Jun. 1960, in Glennon, John P., Edward C. Keefer, and David W. Mabon (Eds.), *Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-1960: East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos.* Vol. XVI, (Washington, 1992), 366.
[15] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia,* 167.
[16] *Ibid.,* 201.
[17] *Ibid.,* 212.

Liberal Party, the Democratic Progressive Party, and the Democratic Party.[18] Significantly, Sihanouk supported none of them.[19]

While all the parties were organized and led by members of the royal family, they were more liberal than the traditional Cambodian monarchy. Even the most traditional of these three, the Democratic Progressive Party, called for reforms to establish a constitutional monarchy.[20] The Liberal Party was nearly ideologically identical, but appealed more to the landholding elite than to the urban businessmen.[21] The Democratic Party was the most liberal. Its partisans vocally advocated immediate independence from France and supported the adoption of a French-style constitution for Cambodia.[22] Among its ranks were the followers of Son Ngoc Thanh, a nationalist who had staged a coup against Sihanouk's government during the Second World War.[23]

Sihanouk's reaction to the emergence of partisan politics in Cambodia is indicative of his conservative leanings. After the formation of the National Assembly 1946, Sihanouk ensured that it remained loyal to him. The victory of the Democrats in the nation's first election demonstrated to Sihanouk that he would have to personally supervise the National Assembly's operation in order to prevent radical social changes. In 1949 Sihanouk dissolved the assembly, disgusted by the inefficiencies inherent in multi-party governing bodies.[24] For the next three years, Sihanouk handpicked the ministers of his government.[25] This would not be the only instance where Sihanouk interfered with the electoral process; indeed, it was only the beginning of Sihanouk's attempts to eliminate the concept of opposition politics from Cambodia. In 1952 after being pressured into allowing elections to resume, he subsequently dismissed the new prime minister and arrested many opposition leaders.[26]

What Sihanouk accomplished in all of this was truly remarkable. Assuming the position of prime minister, Sihanouk hijacked the nationalist movement and began campaigning for Cambodian

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[18] *Ibid*., 213.
[19] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia,* 213.
[20] Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 58.
[21] *Ibid*., 59.
[22] Yong Mun Cheong, "The Political Structures of the Independent States," in Nicholas Tarling (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Vol. 3. Pt. 3,* (Cambridge, 1999), 70.
[23] *Ibid*., 71
[24] Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 62; see also Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia 1930-1975,* (New Haven, 2004), 72.
[25]Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 63.
[26] *Ibid*., 66- 68.

independence himself.[27] After dismissing the National Assembly for a second time in 1953, he began negotiations with France.[28] By October, France had agreed to a transition of power, which occurred later in November.[29] Without a National Assembly or opposition leaders, Sihanouk could personally claim victory for the independence movement. It allowed him to define independence in conservative terms as well. Independence simply meant "free of foreign influence:" it carried no connotations of internal social reforms. According to Sihanouk, independence meant that "[a]ll citizens without distinction or rank must show themselves to be citizens of an independent country…Officials, be loyal and faithful servants of the State and People. Farmers be good farmers; artisans try to be good artisans."[30]

Independence certainly did not mean a French-style republic. In the years immediately following independence, Sihanouk set out to destroy the partisan bickering of the National Assembly. He was so successful that to outsiders it appeared that "there were no political structures available to Cambodia apart from…the prince himself."[31] In March 1955, Sihanouk, in a move of unorthodox political brilliance, abdicated his throne to become a professional politician. He founded a political movement known as the Sangkum Reaste Niyum—The Popular Socialist Community.[32]

It would be incorrect to classify the Sangkum as an ideological party. Though the official ideology of the Sangkum was Buddhist Socialism, Sihanouk admitted that he did not mean socialism in a Marxist sense. Rather, he had adopted the term because of its prevalence in the lexicon of newly independent non-aligned nations. He thought of socialism as connoting improved standards of living, economic development, and anti-imperialism.[33] In reality, the Sangkum was hardly a monolithic body. This tended to produce domestic policy that lacked continuity and regularity.[34]

The only unifying aspect of the Sangkum was its professed loyalty to Sihanouk. The "Prince who has been King" allowed politicians of all parties to join, provided they renounced their former allegiances.[35] This

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[27] Cheong, "The Political Structures of the Independent States," 71.
[28] Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 73-74.
[29] *Ibid*., 80-81.
[30] Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 72.
[31] Cheong, "The Political Structures of the Independent States," 70.
[32] *Ibid*., 71.
[33] Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 136.
[34] *Ibid*., 137.
[35] *Ibid*., 93.

was key. Sihanouk was willing to allow ideological plurality as long as all politicians placed their personal allegiance to him above partisan divisions. Sihanouk expressed his willingness to accommodate ideological diversity within the Sangkum during an interview in the 1970s: "I have relations with Son Ngok-than people, except Son Ngok-than; with Lon Nol people, except Lon Nol" because "…they are my competitors."[36] This strategy, combined with vigorous—and often violent—repression of any political parties remaining outside of the Sangkum, resulted in pro-Sihanouk majority governments from 1955 until 1966.[37]

During this time, Sihanouk faced growing opposition from communist forces on his left and pro-American forces on his right. Sihanouk described the fragmentation of Cambodian politics into three blocs: "First the 'Khmers Blancs'…they [were] nationalists and independent, neutralists and Buddhist. Second, the 'Khmers Blues'—the reactionaries, pro-capitalism, pro the so-called free world. And third, the 'Khmers Rouges" …who [were] the leftists and Communists."[38] Sihanouk viewed domestic politics through the lens of foreign policy. In his domestic policies, he could not support capitalism without becoming U.S.-aligned, nor could he favor land redistribution and egalitarianism without becoming Soviet-aligned. In order to be a true Cambodian nationalist, Sihanouk had to reject all European ideologies.

Sihanouk's dealings with communists during the 1950s and 1960s were often antagonistic, but also included limited accommodation when politically necessary. While these acts of accommodation often confounded U.S. politicians, Sihanouk stressed that "Communists and I, we are bitter enemies!" He described communists as "basically…all traitors, all of them are either pro-Chinese, or pro-Vietminh and pro-Russian—they are accordingly, no Cambodians!"[39] This denial of the indigenous roots to the Cambodian communist movement explained his intense hatred toward them, as well as his specific desire to eliminate the only overtly Communist party, the Pracheachon, in the 1960s.[40] In 1962 he released a list of thirty-four communists accused of treason after peasant uprisings broke out in Siemreap.[41]

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[36] Norodom Sihanouk, Peter Schier, Manola Schier-oum, and Waldtraut Jarke, *Sihanouk on Cambodia: Interviews and Talks with Prince Norodom Sihanouk,* (Hamburg, 1985), 8.
[37] Cheong, "The Political Structures of the Independent States,"71; see also Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power,* 159-160.
[38] Sihanouk, Schier, Shier-oum, and Jarke, *Sihanouk on Cambodia,* 7.
[39] *Ibid.,* 10.
[40] Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 106-107.
[41] *Ibid*., 157.

However, Sihanouk proved far more accommodating of the urban communist elite. He allowed a few—including Khieu Samphan, Chau Seng, and Hou Yuon—to join the Sangkum. These Communists proved important allies for helping implement Sihanouk's foreign policy, which was aimed at keeping Cambodia out of the Vietnam War through non-alignment. They helped fuel Sihanouk's anti-imperialist rhetoric.[42] Cambodia's recognition of the People's Republic of China was an essential aspect of this policy, though it was interpreted by State Department's Office of Southeast Asian Affairs as "lean[ing] left sufficiently to raise [the] question [of] whether it can be called neutrality at all."[43] In a crucial point of fact, however, Sihanouk received foreign aid willingly from both the Soviet Union and the United States.[44] It seemed lost on the U.S. intelligence community that true neutrality would involve maintaining diplomatic relations with the Soviet bloc as well.

On matters of domestic policy, however, Sihanouk gave no serious heed to communist policy. While Sihanouk did renounce most of his American aid and nationalize the import-export bank and Cambodian financial sector in November 1963, these decisions were not intended to create classless society.[45] Instead, Sihanouk was applying his policy of non-alignment to the Cambodian economy. The import-export trade and financial sector in Cambodia was dominated by Chinese and other foreign businessmen.[46] Through these reforms, Sihanouk attempted to free the Cambodian economy from foreign influence. This was entirely consistent with Sihanouk's political aims. Faced with increased leftist criticism in 1964, Sihanouk began the most violent repression and censorship of the urban communist movement. In its wake Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon left the Sangkum to join the underground resistance.[47] Sihanouk clearly did not regard communism "as an inevitable wave of the future in Southeast Asia" as he has often been accused.[48]

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[42] *Ibid*.

[43] FE/SEA Files: Lot 63 D 73, 16.2.1, Memorandum From the Director of the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs (Anderson) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons), 13 May 1960, in Glennon, John P., Edward C. Keefer, and David W. Mabon (Eds.), *Foreign Relations of the United States 1958-1960: East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos.* Vol. XVI, (Washington, 1992), 360.

[44] Roger M. Smith, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy,* (Ithaca, 1966), 123.

[45] Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 161.

[46] *Ibid*.

[47] *Ibid*., 191.

[48] National Security Files, Countries Series, Cambodia, 10/29/61-10/31/61, Memorandum From Robert H. Johnson of the National Security Council to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), 31 Oct. 1961, in LaFantasie, Glenn W. and

Sihanouk applied the same binary distinction between "Sihanouk loyalists" and "foreign traitors" to politicians on Cambodia's right. While Vickery noted that the majority of Sangkum were right-wing, he failed to distinguish between traditional monarchists and pro-American conservatives.[49] While pro-American capitalists were a bane for Sihanouk's foreign policy, they were necessary domestically to ensure that "the new blood [i.e. Khieu Samphan's group] …did not attempt to introduce any significant changes" to Cambodian society.[50] In 1966, fearing the growing influence of the left, Sihanouk decided to allow free elections. This, in theory, was a clever tactic. He understood that since the right-wing politicians had the most money and patronage, they would be the beneficiaries of free elections. The new government was the most pro-American ever elected.[51]

However, Sihanouk was just as oppressive to the far right that remained outside of the Sangkum as he was to the communist left. In 1959, Son Ngoc Thanh, ever the nuisance to Sihanouk during his early years, founded the Khmer Serei to oppose what he saw as Sihanouk's sell-out to communism.[52] Sihanouk went to great lengths to suppress them, even severing diplomatic relations with Thailand out of suspicion that they were supplying Son.[53] Later, Sihanouk supported the show trial and execution of two Khmer Serei shortly before reducing American aid.[54] However, Sihanouk did not properly anticipate the outcry this would cause from the right. When the pro-American Lon Nol-led assembly took power in 1966, Sihanouk regretted ever allowing a body to rule that owed him no political favors.[55] In desperation he created a leftist "counter-government" to check his mistake, but this only produced more political turmoil. In despair he departed for France.[56]

It was the far right that ultimately brought about Sihanouk's fall. A group led by Sisowath Sirik Matak and Lon Nol used Sihanouk's absence in 1970 as an opportunity to lead a coup. While Sihanouk was strongly anti-communist in his domestic policy, his rejection of a pro-American foreign policy and free market economics infuriated them.[57]

Edward C. Keefer (Eds.), *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963: Southeast Asia.* Vol. XXIII. (Washington, 1994), 167.

[49] Vickery, "Looking Back at Cambodia," 101.

[50] *Ibid*.

[51] Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 187-188.

[52] Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, 186.

[53] *Ibid*., 194.

[54] *Ibid*., 206.

[55] Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness,* 188.

[56] *Ibid*., 188.

[57] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia,* 248.

While Sihanouk may have appeared to have been a reactionary to many Marxist-leaning scholars, it is undeniable that the "Prince who has been King" strongly objected to Lon Nol's brand of European conservatism.

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Sihanouk, fiercely independent and anchored in Khmer tradition, rejected European political ideologies as a threat to a truly independent Cambodia—a theme ironically echoed by the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. While willing to accommodate politicians from both ends of the political spectrum, Sihanouk acted purely out of a desire to remain in power. The failure of the United States to comprehend this reality would have tragic consequences. Rather than viewing Sihanouk as vital to the stability of the region, the State Department considered the possibility of losing what it saw as little more than an uncooperative pawn of little consequence. This attitude was even expressed by the U.S. ambassador: "[I]f Sihanouk should disappear from the scene...I would foresee no immediate upheaval."[58] The void left by Sihanouk's departure opened the door for the rise of the Khmer Rouge, easily the most brutal regime in twentieth century southeast Asia. This callous miscalculation of Sihanouk's importance would indirectly result in the death of a third of Cambodia's population within the next decade.

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[58] Department of State, Central Files, 751H.00/3-562, Letter From the Ambassador to Cambodia (Trimble) to the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson), 5 Mar. 1962, in LaFantasie, Glenn W. and Edward C. Keefer (Eds.), *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963, Southeast Asia* Vol. XXIII, (Washington, 1994), 183.

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