

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF U NU AND SIHANOUK

MOO YUBIN

(B.Arts.(Hons.), NUS)

A THESIS SUBMITTED

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF HISTORY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2006

Acknowledgements

To Associate Professor Lockhart and the History Department, thank you for all the support and guidance.

To my parents, thank you for standing by me.

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SUMMARY

This thesis compares the political careers of Burma's U Nu (1948-1962) and Cambodia's Norodom Sihanouk (1941-1970) during the post-colonial period, when both men were icons and initiators of their countries' nation-building efforts.

Similarities

Although the lengths of their tenures were not identical, U Nu and Sihanouk mirrored each other in their career development, leadership style and policies. Both were fortuitously thrust into power as symbols of national unity, but grew to embrace a highly personalized style of leadership that was influenced by their character, beliefs and their predecessors' legacies. In their choice of policies, both men drew meaning and symbolic significance from their countries' history and traditions. As such, both adopted "Buddhist Socialism" as an economic ideology, and "Neutralism" as a strategy of non-alignment, which not only had historical relevance, but were also useful for distinguishing their countries from Cold War allegiances and developmental models. As symbolic leaders, both men were highly popular with the general public; as politicians, however, neither was able to maintain his legitimacy and leadership position amongst the elite. When they were eventually removed from power by respective military coups, it was due to a combination of circumstances, character and choice.

Differences

U Nu and Sihanouk were seeming opposites in character, and were subject to very different national circumstances. Where Nu's public image was one of humility,

sincerity and moral piety, Sihanouk was internationally renowned for his vanity, erratic personality, and combative nature. In terms of national realities, U Nu struggled with crises of ethnic and political disunity throughout his tenure, but never had to face the intensity and spillover conflict of the Indochina War that Sihanouk did in the 1960s. Obviously, these collective differences affected their choices in domestic and foreign policy. Through a comparative analysis, the gravity of each man's situation, as well as the impact of his flaws, can be better understood and assessed.

Thesis

This thesis comprises six chapters, which collectively chart the rise, stagnation and eventual decline of each man's career. Against this parallel backdrop, comparisons are made between their policies, their circumstances, and the reasons for their downfall. Chapter 1 compares U Nu and Sihanouk's elevation to power, and the impact of the legacies they received. Chapters 2 and 3 give a backdrop of how each man tried to move from being merely a symbolic leader, towards consolidating state and political power, before settling into a stage of stagnation when their plans for economic progress or national security had come to a standstill. Chapters 4 and 5 then examine these plans in detail, comparing the respective ideologies of "Buddhist Socialism" and "Neutralism", and how despite the common terminologies, each man interpreted and practiced the policies in varying ways. Finally, Chapter 6 compares the reasons for each man's decline, and suggests that although one of their most important contributions was in having brought, and sustained, symbolic national unity during their tenures, such symbolic leadership could not create an enduring nation and state.

Chapter 1: Symbolic Leaders

*Asked about the significance of U Nu's move, a Western diplomat in Bangkok said: "He's a good figurehead rather than a leader at this point. It will depend on who his advisers are and also on the attitude of the military..' His (U Nu) main value will be as a **symbol**,' said another Western diplomat."He seems to enjoy the support of the majority.'* (10 September 1988, The Dallas Morning News , "Ex-Burmese Prime Minister forms Rival Government")

*Crowned King in 1941, buffeted by insurgencies, a coup, the Pol Pot takeover and the Vietnamese invasion, the Prince has remained for 50 years the **symbol** of Cambodian independence and nationalism. He is seen as the unifying tie and the **symbol** of hope in the midst of chaos. But apart from that, he is weak. He used to be a powerful, authoritarian leader. But he is not the same leader in this government.* (16 October 1998, The Washington Post, "Sihanouk Retains Respect but Little Power; With Government in Turmoil, Weakened Cambodian King Seen as Potential Mediator")

Decades after their political careers had ended, two of Southeast Asia's prominent post-war leaders, U Nu and Sihanouk, were each described as national symbols. Nu, a symbol of nationalism and the 'Father of Democracy' to Burma, had been ousted by the military in 1962, but had re-emerged in 1988 to declare a parallel government, insisting that his office as Premier was still legitimate. Sihanouk, the professed 'Lion of Southeast Asia' and a symbol of unity and moral authority, had been removed from power in 1970 by a right wing military coup, but was reinstated as King in 1993 as part of a UN plan to

set Cambodia on the road to recovery after the devastation wrought by the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese invasion and civil war. Cambodia in the 1990s faced a potential civil war due to political strife, most notably between Hun Sen and Prince Ranaridh, and hopes were high that Sihanouk, as a symbol of the monarchical tradition would restore a semblance of national unity to Cambodia. Despite this “revival” of the symbolic roles of U Nu and Sihanouk however, observers were quick to add that they were now more useful as figureheads rather than as leaders with any real clout or political power..

The symbolic significance that U Nu and Sihanouk retained was possible largely because of the legacy each man had established during their tenures as post-colonial nation-builders. The careers of U Nu and Sihanouk during the 1950s and 1960s thus represent an interesting perspective on the political history of Southeast Asia, and useful comparisons can be made on various fronts.

Basis for Comparison

To begin with, among the various Southeast Asian nationalist forces that emerged during the region’s transition from colonial rule to independence after the Second World War, U Nu and Sihanouk represented opposite “spectrums” of the legacy of colonial rule. Prince Sihanouk was an example of the traditional indigenous elite that “governed” under colonial influence, while U Nu was an example of the “new elite” that had emerged under the colonial administration after the traditional hierarchy had been removed (the British effectively ended the Burmese Monarchy when they dethroned the king after annexing Burma in 1886)

Despite these different starting points, both U Nu and Sihanouk also shared political traits that were typical of Southeast Asian nation-builders. Their aim, like other post-colonial leaders, was to guide their countries' transition from the uncertainty of fledgling independence towards a vision of political and economic stability. In envisioning and articulating the roadmap towards such stability, both men drew inspiration and legitimacy from national traditions and historical circumstances, so as to ease their countries' transition into modern concepts of statehood. This was most evident in U Nu and Sihanouk's seeming "convergence" upon two key nation-building ideologies – Buddhist Socialism and Neutralism. In practice, although each man's interpretation and implementation of these ideologies differed from the other due to differences in each man's character and circumstances, their efforts ultimately ended in failure when they were overthrown by respective military coups.

The aftermath of their downfall saw the situation in their countries worsen, with Burma subject to military rule, and Cambodia veering towards the right, which in turn set the stage for subsequent violent reaction from Marxist left. To draw a further comparison between U Nu and Sihanouk, one might interpret their downfall and the events that followed as a backlash against the "excesses" of their rule. U Nu was regarded by the military as having been excessive in tolerating the breakaway aspirations of minority factions that threatened the Burmese Union. Sihanouk was seen by the military right as having leaned excessively towards appeasing Communist Vietnam and putting the country (and their status) at risk. Within recent Southeast Asia history, Burma and Cambodia were examples of two countries that missed the opportunity for successful and stable development made available by the end of colonialism.

The question then is the extent to which either U Nu or Sihanouk was responsible for such failure and missed opportunities? Were there common characteristics or circumstances of each man's leadership that jeopardized their chances? Post-colonial Southeast Asia was a hotbed of political activity and political "experimentation" for alternatives to the colonial systems of government; if we regard U Nu and Sihanouk's forays into "socialism", "democracy" and "neutralism" were "experiments" that went wrong, what can we learn about the conditions and components of each man's experiment that contrasted them from other success stories in Southeast Asia? What were the consequences of their application of modern concepts of statehood to their respective traditional societies? What was it about the circumstances, character traits or choices that each man made, that resulted in a failure from which their countries have yet to recover? Did they somehow sow the seeds for their countries' further decline?

This first chapter will examine the extent to which the different origins and the legacies they inherited might have influenced the eventual outcome of their political fortunes. Were Sihanouk and U Nu largely doomed to fail from the outset? To address this question, it is necessary to first chart each man's rise to power.

1.1 Trails to Prominence

Neither U Nu nor Sihanouk began with ambition or affinity toward politics. Their respective trails to prominence were trademarked by a circumstantial, almost fortuitous, thrust into power, followed by transformation from unlikely candidates into dominant political actors. Throughout this process, both had to grapple with the legacies left by their respective predecessors, a struggle made more difficult as what they inherited often

seemed more burdensome as tripping stones than they were useful as guiding markers. From the outset, neither their character nor circumstance seemed to indicate that either U Nu or Sihanouk would be able to develop careers as political leaders.

Interestingly, both Sihanouk and U Nu were initially called to serve primarily as symbols for their fledgling nations so as to restore order and stability: Sihanouk was first appointed King by the French in 1941 in the hope that his youth and seeming lack of ambition would allow the colonials to manipulate his symbolic aura to better manage the protectorate at a time when French power was weakening.¹ U Nu was pressed by outgoing British governor Hubert Rance to take over the government in the wake of Aung San's assassination in 1947, it was less for his ability, and more for his status as an unassuming and generally well-received figure who could appease and rally the various groups jockeying for position within the power vacuum. Both U Nu and Sihanouk were thrust into prominence and power by forces outside their control. Opportunity found each man at a point in his life when the transition to public life seemed unlikely for the private paths taken by U Nu and Sihanouk prior to this gave no signs as to the heights to which they would rise.

U Nu's Path

U Nu had initially seemed more geared towards writing than politics. Born to a middle class family in the Myaungmya district, Nu's formative years saw him change from a wayward alcoholic youth to a young man whose encounter with Buddhism turned him into a pensive, if somewhat impulsive student who had a passion for literature.

¹ France had surrendered to Nazi Germany by this time and protecting French interests against the threat of Japanese incursion from Thailand was important to France.

During the 1920s, Nu was swept up in the wave of student nationalism that enveloped Burma, and found himself increasingly involved from the 1930s onwards, from demonstrations in high school, to joining the Students' Union in University, the Youth League, and, eventually, the Dobama Asiayone – the one organization whose aim was early and unconditional independence for Burma.² Throughout, even though U Nu had displayed oratory and leadership skills, and had a desire to overcome injustice, he was never regarded a dominant or authority figure. Some of his contemporaries in the Students' Union considered him instead a mere figurehead, with two others, Kyaw Nyein and Raschid, being accorded more importance.³ Within the Dobama Asiayone, he was popular for his pleasant personality and piety, but, being outranked by 3 other men: Aung San, Than Tun and Thakin Soe, U Nu willingly assumed a secondary position.⁴ U Nu's willingness to relinquish leadership to others was evident even as he participated in the nationalist movement. He repeatedly claimed to have little desire for politics; his aim was simply to remove the ills and injustice of British imperialism in Burma, after which he would become a writer.

This attitude continued during the Japanese Occupation of Burma, where U Nu's involvement, importance and initiative in political leadership paled in comparison to the likes of Dr Ba Maw – Prime Minister in the wartime government – and Aung San – whose efforts in the Anti-Fascist Organization gave life and legend to the resistance movement. U Nu saw himself as one too indecisive to be a politician, and too inept with

² Richard Butwell, U Nu of Burma, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969, 2nd ed) p.28

³ Ibid., p.18

⁴ Ibid., p.32

weapons to join in the fighting.⁵ Even when he was persuaded by Dr Ba Maw to become Foreign Minister in August, 1943, it was, according to U Nu, with great reluctance and upon the condition that he be allowed to retire from politics after independence was achieved, that he acceded. Based on these indications, U Nu's path seemed, by the end of the war, to be one that would lead away, rather than toward, a dominant role in Burma's political scene. The two indicating factors were U Nu's self-professed disinterest, and the presence of other more capable and willing individuals.

Sihanouk's Ascension

These two factors could also be used to describe Prince Norodom Sihanouk's ascension to the Cambodian throne at the tender age of eighteen in 1941. Sihanouk had not been, in terms of birthright and importance, the next in line for succession to the throne. There were at least two other more obvious candidates, his father, Prince Suramarit, and his uncle, Prince Monireth, and another Norodom named Norindeth.⁶ Having grown up with a deep sense of loneliness and vulnerability –he had been distanced from his estranged parents and sent away at an early age to study in Vietnam – Sihanouk did not show any inclination toward the throne, and busied himself with recreational activities like sports, music and movies. From the outset, there was no indication that he would be king, much less the dominant and fiery politician of the 1960s. Even after the French bypassed all other candidates to place him on the throne, arguably in the hope that he was malleable and could be bent to their will, Sihanouk did not disappoint in his subservience to the colonial powers, and continued his self-

⁵ U Nu, Burma under Japanese rule: Pictures and Portraits, edited and translated with introduction by John Sydenham Furnivall. London: Macmillan, 1954, p.106

⁶ John A. Tully, France on the Mekong: A History of the Protectorate in Cambodia, 1863-1953. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003, p.351

professed antics as a ‘playboy’ and a ‘useless young man’. As described by Milton Osborne, ‘from the time he was named king in September 1941 until the Japanese coup de force in 1945 that temporarily eliminated French control over Indochina, the essential feature of Sihanouk’s life was his readiness to play the part the French planned for him.’⁷ Sihanouk proved useful to the Japanese as well, who, after the coup in 1945, tried to develop Khmer nationalism as a defense against the allies by “encouraging” Sihanouk to declare “Cambodian Independence” on March 11 and appointing him Prime Minister. Up till the end of the war, there was no reason to see Sihanouk as a man with his own political agenda, much less one who could lead or dominate Cambodian politics.

Comparison

By the end of the Second World War, U Nu and Sihanouk found themselves in positions that would lead to deeper political involvement. U Nu had ‘drifted this way and that and, little by little, without being a politician, he found himself –by agreeing to join Dr Ba Maw’s Preparatory Committee –entangled in the world of politics.’⁸ (Nu agreed on the condition that he would be dropped once the committee was expanded into a government council.) After the Japanese surrendered, Nu was again persuaded out of retirement by Aung San to join the AFPFL as his lieutenant in the final drive for independence.⁹ Though he still ranked behind other leaders, U Nu’s active nationalism saw him rise to AFPFL Vice President in 1947. Comparatively, Sihanouk was also becoming accustomed to his role. After installing him as king, the French had encouraged him to journey to different parts of his country, to interact with the people. Out of this

⁷ Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, (NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin), 1994, p.30

⁸ U Nu, *Burma*, p.29.

⁹ Butwell, *U Nu*, p.51

grew a genuine belief within Sihanouk regarding the symbolic importance of his person and the monarchy to his people. The wartime experience allowed Sihanouk to ‘dabble’ briefly in state affairs as ‘Prime Minister’, such that he even emerged at the end of the war calling for a form of constitutional democracy through universal male suffrage.¹⁰

Despite being ushered into the political process, however, both U Nu and Sihanouk still remained largely on the periphery in many ways. For instance, Nu organized the campaign, but did not stand for election to the Constituent Assembly in April 1947 despite Aung San’s urging him to do so.¹¹ Nu’s reluctance was obvious from his repeated hope for a ‘divorce from politics’. Sihanouk, too, could not yet be “fully immersed” in Khmer nationalism; he remained subdued by his colonial loyalties –such as publicly declaring that the “Cambodian people had always loved France]¹² – and was still described by British reports as devoting ‘a considerable amount of his time to personal amusement.’¹³ As Constitutional Monarch, Sihanouk was also restrained from participating fully in Cambodia’s fledgling democratic process; and had to grudgingly back the Liberal Party and observe its contest with other emergent parties. Neither U Nu nor Sihanouk remained at the periphery for long, however. Having arrived at a position of involvement, but not dominance, it would take a combination of specific events and motivations to give each man that final fortuitous thrust into power.

¹⁰ Osborne, Sihanouk, p.51

¹¹ Butwell, U Nu, p.54

¹² Tully, France, p.400

¹³ Ibid. p.415

1.2 Transition to Power

Sihanouk's Transition

Sihanouk's transition began in 1941, with his elevation to kingship at age eighteen. He could, however, have remained merely a symbolic king within a constitutional monarchy like his Southeast Asian counterparts in Thailand and Malaya, but due to a combination of personal motive and fortuitous events, he was able to step out of the conventional mold to gain both symbolic and political dominance. Although Sihanouk often attributed his transformation from 'playboy king' to patriotic statesman as a process motivated by his awakening to the 'inequities of colonial rule' and a subsequent decision to embark upon a crusade for Cambodian independence,¹⁴ this perspective is somewhat skewed. It was likely that Sihanouk joined the fray in an attempt to stem or manage the rising nationalistic tide he regarded as a threat to his image and indispensability. For example, in July 1942, when several thousand nationalist Khmers took part in a demonstration inspired by the *Nagaravatta* – a Khmer-language weekly which had begun taking anti-French positions – to demand the release of a nationalist monk, Sihanouk neither supported nor sympathized with the protestors. This event, known as the 'Parasol Revolt' was significant in establishing Son Ngoc Thanh, one of the *Nagaravatt's* founders, as a leading figure in Cambodian nationalism. In 1945, after the Japanese had surrendered and many of the 'Parasol Revolt' nationalists returned to Cambodia– Sihanouk ignored them, presumably because he was 'jealous of anyone who would steal his limelight'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid. p.390

¹⁵ Ibid

Sihanouk at this stage was less concerned for the nationalistic cause than he was for his status as Cambodia's leader. He was astute enough to realize that the symbolic status he enjoyed as king could easily be replaced by alternative nationalists such as Son Ngoc Thanh. Thanh had returned from Japan to Cambodia in March 1945 after the Japanese orchestrated Cambodia's "Independence", and had served as Prime Minister from August onwards. After the French returned in September, however, it was rumored that Sihanouk had a hand in having Thanh arrested and sent into exile. Five years later, when Thanh was brought back to Cambodia—possibly as a wagering chip in Sihanouk's negotiations with the French – the huge public welcome he received stirred Sihanouk's jealousy. Thanh went on to threaten Sihanouk directly by following other anti-monarchical nationalists (*Khmer Serei* – "*Independent Cambodians*") to join the wider *Khmer Issarak* ("*Free Cambodians*") leftist rebellion against the French and the Cambodian monarchy. Milton Osborne suggested that if there was a single factor that gave Sihanouk the final motivational thrust from dilettante politician to a ruler committed both to gaining independence and to ensuring that he alone held the reins of power, Thanh's affront would be that factor.¹⁶

Arguably, Sihanouk's transition to power had developed gradually as a series of self-preserving motivations and reactions to other political players. It was, however, due to the fortuitous timing of political developments that gave him opportunities for maneuvering and manipulation. One significant example was the death of Prince Yuthevong, leader of the Democrats, on 18 July 1947. Formed in April 1946, the Democrats had become the best-organized political force in the country, and campaigned

¹⁶ Osborne, Sihanouk, p.67

actively for a constitutional monarchy. Led by Yuthevong, a capable intellectual who had studied in France, the Democrats were the most popular party during Cambodia's period of constitutional parliamentary democracy in the immediate post-war period. After winning 50 of 69 seats in the 1946 elections, the Democrats seemed poised to dominate the continuing discussion about the form of Cambodia's constitution with the goal of reducing the king's power.¹⁷ At this point, Sihanouk was still largely uninvolved in Cambodian politics; though still believing in his divine right to rule, he ratified and agreed tacitly to a system of constitutional monarchy. With Yuthevong's death, however, the Democrats not only lost a capable leader who might have rivaled Sihanouk in securing Cambodian independence, but the parliamentary system also suffered, as the loss of a strong liberal weakened the constitutional system, and paved the way for absolutism. Shortly after this, Sihanouk began moving away from the liberal values he had earlier espoused and began to interfere in the political process, realizing perhaps that the frailty of the parliamentary process was unproductive and dangerous to his position. Had Yuthevong survived, the possibility and extent of Sihanouk's activities might have been significantly challenged or reduced.

U Nu's Transition

Comparatively, where it was the 'timely' death of a rival that played a part in Sihanouk's transition to power, it was the unfortunate death of a friend that pushed U Nu into the limelight. A day after Yuthevong's death on 18 July 1947, General Aung San, President of the AFPFL, and Deputy Chairman of Burma's interim government, was assassinated along with a number of other executive councilors. Although controversy

¹⁷ Ibid, p.59

remains over the identities and motives of the perpetrators, it was clear to British Governor Sir Hubert Rance and the AFPFL leaders that U Nu should succeed Aung San. Nu reluctantly acceded upon Rance's insistence, but with the condition that it was a temporary solution, and that he would be allowed to step down six months after independence had been acquired.¹⁸ U Nu described the suddenness and significance of this event as follows:

“‘Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.’ Thakin Nu clearly fell into the third category. He did not have any special gifts at birth and strove for no qualities to fit him for the office of prime minister; circumstances alone put him there. If at the time of General Aung San's death either Thakin Mya or Deedok U Ba Choe had been spared, it would not have been possible for Thakin Nu to assume the premiership. Thakin Nu himself, as vice-president of the AFPFL, would have proposed the name of either one or the other of these and got him elected. As the Burmese might say, U Nu found himself above the shrubbery only because a wild ox flung him up there.’”¹⁹

As leader of the AFPFL, U Nu threw himself passionately into the final push for independence, knowing that its reality would enable his departure from politics. After further negotiations in London on the Aung San-Attlee Agreement of January 1947 that had committed the British to Burma's independence, full authority was finally transferred on January 4, 1948. Instead of gradually relinquishing the leadership role that had been thrust upon him however, the 6 months thereafter saw U Nu becoming more involved as

¹⁸ The Nation, June 6 1956

¹⁹ U Nu, Saturday's Son, p.135

Burma's Premier. In contrast to Sihanouk, who had feared he would become dispensable, U Nu found that his presence was increasingly perceived as vital to the stability and success of Burma's fledgling independence. Similar to Sihanouk, however, was the fact that Nu's transition from temporary Premier, to Burma's most prominent politician for the next decade, was also a combined result of opportunity, political developments and personal motivations. Although U Nu did have different values and reasons for taking up power, the one fortuitous event – that of Aung San's death – not only pushed Nu into power, but set in motion a chain of developments over the next year that drew Nu deeper into a world he had tried to avoid.

Aung San's death not only placed the responsibility of leadership on an unwilling U Nu, but also saddled the new Premier with enormous shoes to fill, and even bigger problems. The major challenge of Burma's diverse and potentially volatile ethnic and political groups had been held in check by Aung San's aura and vision. In the vacuum left by the demise of the man popularly known as the Great General (*Bogyoke*), however, some sought to challenge the considerably weaker leadership and government of the inexperienced and introverted Nu. The most significant of these, was the general-secretary of the CPB (Communist Party of Burma), Than Tun, who, as an AFPFL founder, did not appreciate being relegated by Nu and the Socialists as Burma moved towards 'independence'. Than Tun denounced the Nu-Attlee Treaty of October 1947 as a sham, highlighting the defence arrangement which allowed a British military training mission to remain for 3 years, as evidence of British intention to subvert Burma's

sovereignty.²⁰ When independence was declared in January 1948, it was without the support of the CPB, who had by this time decided to ‘intensify the struggle against the AFPFL government while the forces of revolution were strong.’²¹ The CPB’s undertaking of armed insurrection effectively forced Nu to remain in office, as he recalled,

‘On 29 March 1948, seventy-six days after independence, the Communist Party of Burma rebelled. As soon as this happened, Thakin Nu realized that his expectation of being able to quit politics by 4 July 1948 had disappeared in the twinkling of an eye.’²²

Contrary to his initial aim, Nu was to stay in power for the next decade, as Than Tun’s revolution was but the first in a series of armed uprisings from various factions and ethnic groups that plunged Burma into civil war.

Both Sihanouk and U Nu had stepped into politics under certain fortuitous circumstances, and both had been motivated by fears of national insecurity and instability. However, where Sihanouk’s driving fear was that political chaos would threaten his position if left unchecked, U Nu’s concern was to maintain the fragile unity of the Burmese nation. Nu stated that his motivation for remaining in office longer than intended, was to fulfill a moral and national duty, rather than his own political ambition. Whether or not his intentions were sincere, it is clear that Nu did not actively scheme to expand his political influence, but was swept along by forces beyond his control; this contrasted with Sihanouk’s self-serving motivations and manipulation.

²⁰ Martin Smith, Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity, London: Zed Books. 1991, p.103

²¹ Ibid.

²² U Nu, Saturday’s Son, p.147

1.3 Inherited Legacies - Help or Hindrance?

U Nu and Sihanouk also inherited the historical and political legacies of their respective predecessors. Ushered into power as guiding symbols in the midst of uncertainty, both men drew legitimacy and lessons from the past. On the other hand, these legacies also shaped their leadership styles and ideologies, as the transfer of power also brought past burdens that affected their political circumstances, choices and calculations. For U Nu, stepping into the shoes of a nationally-revered martyr meant he would inadvertently be compared to Aung San and judged by his ability to fulfill the “Bogyoke’s” promises and vision. This ultimately affected Nu’s own actions and fortunes as Premier. Sihanouk, while not having a predecessor’s mission to fulfill, had been raised under the larger overlapping influences of French colonial rule and Angkorean kingship. As such, the legacy he inherited was in the form of inculcated worldview and traditions. In comparing the respective mandates that came with their leadership mantles, one question was whether these legacies served as useful guiding markers, or whether they had potential to become stumbling blocks. This can be analyzed in the three issues of national unity, domestic political system and foreign policy.

National Unity

U Nu’s predecessor, Aung San, had felt that the best way to surmount the challenge of uniting the myriad of ethnic groups within Burma was through “unity in diversity”, which stressed local autonomy and limited separation among the non Burman

ethnic groups.²³ In this regard, Aung San called for the establishment of a Union based on a Federal system ‘with properly regulated provisions as should be made to safeguard the rights of the National Minorities’.²⁴ To secure cooperation for the Burmese government’s push for independence, Aung San promised the Shan, Chin and Kachin groups, at the Panglong Agreement of 12 February 1947, that their financial and administrative autonomy would not be compromised. On the specific issue of separate states, the agreement stated that a ‘separate Kachin state within a unified Burma...is desirable’. Aung San further extended his vision to other groups when, less than two months before his death, he stated that:

“Nobody can deny that the Karens are a national minority...Therefore we must concede to them the rights of a national minority...Now when we build our new Burma shall we build it as a Union or a Unitary State? In my opinion, it will not be feasible to set up a unitary State.’²⁵

Although Aung San died before he could explain how the Union was to be achieved in practice, his promise and goal of a Federal Union, resided in spirit and principle with all the ethnic groups thereafter. Aung San believed his achievement at Panglong was an ‘important guidepost for Burmese seeking a permanent answer to the vexing problem of majority-minority relations.’²⁶

This guidepost, however, turned out to be more a barrier for U Nu in his pursuit of national unity. The fact that Aung San was trusted by the minorities because he was fair

²³ Silverstein, Legacy, p.11

²⁴ An Address, May 1947, cited in Josef Silverstein, “The Struggle for National Unity in the Union of Burma.” Ph.D. Dissertation.Cornell University, 1960, p.224

²⁵ Shelby Tucker, Burma, Curse of Independence, University of Michigan Press, 2001, p.152

²⁶ Silverstein, Legacy, p.13

and had a clear view of their rights and place in the Union of Burma doubtlessly helped shape U Nu's own sincere approach towards the other races. Beyond that, however, Aung San's legacy proved more a hindrance than a help to U Nu. Due to Aung San's revered status, Nu had to follow – or at least pay lip-service to – his predecessor's policies. In practice, however, Nu's ideas about what constituted and the means of achieving national unity differed from Aung San's. Where Aung San believed in unity within diversity, U Nu was fundamentally opposed to the implications of this principle, and to the idea of separate states, that could result in the Union's disintegration. Although Aung San had seriously considered the possibility of separate states within the Union, a few months after Aung San's death, U Nu stated that he was “cent per cent against the creation of Autonomous States for Karen, Mons and Arakanese.”²⁷ U Nu's preference for assimilation and the formation of a unitary state would ultimately alienate the ethnic groups who felt that Aung San's promise had been betrayed.

In comparison, Sihanouk did not have to deal with ethnic issues of such magnitude. Although he had to resolve hostilities between Cambodians and the minority Chinese and Vietnamese, there were never pressing demands for statehood in the like of Burma's ethnic nationalities. Rather, the legacy he received from the French was one that had instilled a sense of historical unity and past greatness into the Cambodian people. The Cambodian notion of national unity in the wake of the French departure was not one simply based on the homogeneity of the Khmer population. Rather, through the French “discovery” of the past glories of fourteenth century Angkorean kingdom, a notion of Cambodia was created that ‘bequeathed to the Khmer the unmanageable notion that their

²⁷ Tucker, p.152

ancestors had been for a time the most powerful and most gifted people of mainland Southeast Asia.’²⁸ This historical perception of using past grandeur as a framework for the present, impacted Sihanouk’s leadership style. Not only did he use Angkor’s past glories to rally his people and give purpose to his policies, but, as David Chandler points out, Sihanouk’s thinking was colored by a notion of the essential “innocence” of the Cambodian people. Given that a corollary idea of Angkor was that anything that went wrong in Cambodia could be blamed on foreigners²⁹ (where Angkor’s decline in the 12th century had been a direct result of invasion, first from the Chams in the East, then from the Thais in the West) it was no surprise that Sihanouk would be extremely suspicious and sensitive towards external criticisms and threats. This, coupled with an inherent resistance towards critical self-examination, ultimately hindered Sihanouk’s ability to discern the symptoms and causes of internal discontent and disorder.

Political System

In terms of domestic political system, U Nu agreed with Aung San that “true” constitutional democracy was the best political structure for Burma’s development, as well as the solution to Burma’s quest for national unity.³⁰ ‘By true democracy, Aung San meant a state which was based upon the consent of the people and was identified with their interests in theory and in practice. Democracy alone, he held, was the foundation upon which real national progress could be built.’³¹ After becoming Premier, U Nu built on this idea, stressing that democracy not only allowed the individual freedom and the

²⁸ David Chandler, The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution since 1945, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, p.6

²⁹ Ibid, p.7

³⁰ Silverstein, Struggle, pp.246-247

³¹ Silverstein, Legacy, pp.11-12

opportunity to develop fully, but also enabled men to choose and change their leaders and programmes through peaceful means.³² Considering the volatile nature of Burmese politics after independence, Democracy seemed a necessary way for opposing groups to interact through non-violent means.

U Nu's emphasis on consultation and consensus however, limited the Burmese government's effectiveness in restoring order.. As opposing personalities in the AFPFL wrestled for clout within the democratic framework during the 1950s, the lack of consensus paralyzed the civilian government, such that the Army, under General Ne Win, had to be called in to form a temporary caretaker government after the AFPFL split in 1958. When the Army mounted a coup in 1962 to take full control, it was partly because they had lost faith in the effectiveness of Nu's democratic leadership style that had only resulted in a disjointed government, and a Union at the verge of disintegration. The 'experiment' of parliamentary democracy that Nu inherited and was obliged to see through, did not bode well for his political fortunes. Burmese political culture was characterized by a deep-rooted authoritarian tradition³³, and U Nu faced an uphill task from the outset in his attempt to fulfill Aung San's vision of building democracy in Burma.

In comparison, authoritarianism was the hallmark of the political system left to Sihanouk. As described by John Tully, 'French colonialism did not leave behind a

³² Silverstein, Struggle, p.247

³³ Robert Taylor, The State in Burma, London: C. Hurst & Company. 1987. Also Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press. 1987.

representative government, an independent judiciary, still less a guaranteed free press. On balance, colonialism probably strengthened the existing tendencies in traditional Cambodian society towards autocracy and the exclusion of the general population from decision-making.’³⁴ The French had ruled their protectorate in Cambodia as a ‘dictatorship of police and civil servants’³⁵, and this, perhaps, influenced Sihanouk to reject liberal values in favor of authoritarianism; during his career, Sihanouk repeatedly dissolved parliament, refused to entertain dissenting opinions, and centralized power by creating a political party – *Sangkum* – to rubber stamp his decisions, and by eventually appointing himself Chief of State for life. The French had governed in a paternalistic style, regarding the general population as powerless to advance their own cause; Sihanouk seemed to mirror this in the way he considered Cambodians his ‘children’, and that he, as their King, knew what was best for them.³⁶ This self-absorption not only blinded him to personal failures and mounting public disaffection, but also fuelled political dissension in the long run. The eventual military coup which toppled him, and the simultaneous unrestrained rise of subversive Cambodian leftist forces during his tenure, were direct reactions to Sihanouk’s one-man rule. The legacy of an authoritarian tradition proved disastrous when carried to myopic extremes by Sihanouk.

Where U Nu inherited a political legacy that aimed to function on the basis of popular vote and consensus, Sihanouk received one that compelled him to embrace autocratic practices. Both were to find that each political system had its shortcomings and consequences.

³⁴ Tully, p.488

³⁵ Ibid, pp.287-304

³⁶ Osborne, p.38-29

Foreign Policy

One legacy that was relatively more positive and useful as a guide for both Sihanouk and U Nu, however, was that of foreign policy. In posturing and portraying their nations within the realm of international affairs, both men relied largely, for better or for worse, on the guiding principles laid down by their respective predecessors.

U Nu's practice of foreign policy was possibly influenced by his predecessor's worldview. Aung San's ideas about Burma's relations with the outside world were based on two propositions – firstly, that Burma must be strong internally – politically united, economically viable, and administratively effective – in order to protect its people from dissolution and external threats; and secondly, that Burma must be allied with friendly neighbors and other powers in order to deter or defend against a large-scale attack.³⁷ Aung San's propositions and principles seemed to be reflected and expanded in U Nu's decisions. Aung San had advocated active participation in the United Nations (UN); U Nu took heed, such that when he faced the problem of Chinese Nationalist troops using Burma as a base against Communist China, he brought the problem to the UN for resolution in 1953. Aung San had advised regional cooperation with other nations' multilateral interests as means to maintain Burma's security; U Nu did this, not only by taking leading roles in regional initiatives – such as the 1955 Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement –, but also by meeting other leaders to share his views on global peaceful coexistence. Where Aung San had urged rival Chinese political factions to find a peaceful solution to their internal disputes, U Nu broadened the ambitions of Burmese arbitration efforts by offering to mediate between cold war rivals, US and

³⁷ Silverstein, Legacy, p.16

China. In this sense, U Nu seemed to build and expand on Aung San's vision for Burma's place in the world. More significantly, U Nu's choice of non-alignment and friendship to all nations as a means of navigating the dangers of Cold War allegiances, also reflected Aung San's desire for Burma to avoid making enemies.

In Sihanouk's case, however, legacies of animosity and aggression were the central influences on his understanding of foreign policy. In addition to the deep history of Cambodia's antipathies and geographical vulnerabilities with regards to its neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam, Sihanouk also inherited French regional perceptions and experiences. During the 1930s, France was involved in a territorial dispute with Thailand over Battambang and parts of the Siem Reap province in Cambodia. In 1940, Thailand took advantage of French capitulation to Nazi Germany, and took the territories by force in a skirmishing war.³⁸ Although the territories were returned to France in 1946 after the war, the direct affront to Cambodian territorial sovereignty was reason for future suspicions towards Thai intentions.

With regards to Vietnam, even though it was, like Cambodia, part of French Indochina, the French never sought to alleviate the animosity between the two cultures. Prior to the French arrival in the 19th century, the Khmers and Vietnamese had long been at odds over the fertile lower Mekong delta, where there were no natural topographical barriers to Vietnamese expansion,³⁹ and Vietnam had actually colonized the largely Khmer-populated Mekong since the 17th century. It was partly due to Sihanouk's

³⁸ Tully, pp.330-339

³⁹ Ibid, p.12

grandfather's (King Norodom) fear of encroachment from the east, that played into the hands of the French colonials seeking to establish a "protectorate" in Cambodia. Under the French however, these fears and suspicions continued. For instance, as Cambodian nationalism developed in the 1930s, a pro-Cambodian newspaper, *Nagaravatta*, stated that Cambodia's main enemy was not the French, but the "Annamites" who intended to take over the country via large scale emigration'.⁴⁰ When Sihanouk took power, he continued this trend in Cambodian nationalism in playing up anti-Vietnamese sentiments to garner support. Perhaps the most significant legacy the French left, was that they had established a 'Protectorate' on the pretext of defending Cambodia from traditional enemies; once the French departed, Cambodia's fear –whether real or imagined – of its neighbours naturally re-emerged. This could partially explain why Sihanouk eventually chose a neutralist path instead of the pro-US stance that Thailand and South Vietnam took. Unlike U Nu, Sihanouk did not receive a legacy that advised goodwill and regional cooperation; but rather, he was reminded to be wary and, where necessary, aggressive. As Sihanouk's foreign policy developed within this combative and suspicious mold, Cambodia became increasingly isolated from neighbours and superpowers alike.

While their understanding and approach to foreign policy were influenced in different ways, both U Nu and Sihanouk inherited the task of ensuring their countries' survival. To that end, both adopted a form of "neutralism" in dealing with external relations – albeit with varying definitions and goals. Where U Nu's understanding of 'neutralism' was to avoid entering pacts that would portray Burma as a threat to either side in the Cold War, Sihanouk's aim was to lean Cambodia towards the side that best

⁴⁰ Ibid,p.247

served Cambodia's needs at any moment; to use Cambodia's non-committal status as leverage against the different blocs to prevent them, or their proxies, from encroaching upon Cambodia's status and territorial sovereignty. This will be further discussed in Chapter 4. On the surface, however, U Nu's approach seemed more sincere and straightforward than Sihanouk's opportunistic and mercurial methods. This difference could be partially traced to the differing legacies they each inherited regarding the way their respective predecessors approached foreign relations.

1.4 Doomed from the Start?

On balance, the political legacies that U Nu and Sihanouk inherited, and the circumstances they found themselves in at the outset, did not bode well for their careers. These problems were compounded by the nature of their entry into politics that ensured each would face an uphill struggle for legitimacy and effective control throughout much of their careers. Although U Nu and Sihanouk were brought onto the scene to quell political divisiveness, the way each man had been ushered to prominence ironically resulted in each having a greater potential to divide rather than unite their countries. .

U Nu for instance, had been thrust into leadership entirely by accident, by the "virtue" of being one of the key AFPFL leaders who had escaped assassination. Aung San was still the symbol of Burmese nationalism and this meant Nu began with virtually no political currency with which to galvanize either the people or the different interest groups within the Union. The lack of political legitimacy at the outset made it expedient for Nu and those who looked to him, to meld his political status with that of traditional

Buddhist rulers. Nu did not exploit his religious beliefs, but the lack of political clout meant he was “destined” to be less a symbol of Burmese nationalism than he was a symbol of religious revival. As a proponent of Buddhism, Nu’s political station could be somewhat legitimized among the majority Burmans, but would eventually become a point of division with the non-Buddhist groups.

As for Sihanouk, his entry into politics was not achieved by building consensus, but by largely sweeping under and over the other political interests in Cambodia. Sihanouk exploited his royal status to the maximum, especially in galvanizing support from the common people, and made no effort to seek conciliation amongst the political interest groups in Phnom Pehn. Having been regarded a mere “puppet” of the French since his appointment to the throne, Sihanouk was already alienated from the existing political movements within Cambodia from the outset. This “outsider” status would continue to shape his political approach for the rest of his career, as Sihanouk saw himself above the political fray, ruling entirely on the basis of the peoples’ support. Yet it would be the eventual backlash from Phnom Pehn’s political elites that would eventually lead to his downfall.

It is fair to conclude therefore, albeit with the benefit of hindsight, that the seeds for Nu and Sihanouk’s failures were sown from the outset of their political careers. Although neither man could change the natural or historical circumstances they received – eg. Burma’s ethnic problems; Cambodia’s vulnerable geographical position between two traditional rivals – there was nevertheless potential to maneuver in terms of

developing their own ideas and policies. In this regard, as their careers progressed, both men did seek, at varying levels to ‘free’ themselves from perceived inhibitions, transcend past ideas and chart independent paths.

1.5 A Different Trajectory

As U Nu and Sihanouk sought to move beyond the roles and molds that had been cast by their predecessors, both men realized that to govern effectively, they could not remain merely ‘symbolic’ leaders. The path from symbol to strongman required each to prove that his political legitimacy was based on more than inherited mandate or mantle.

For instance, Sihanouk decided to break from his colonial links when he realized that his association with the French made him a target for the communists and nationalists. The British Foreign Office in Cambodia reported in 1953 that ‘the Vietminh and the *Khmer Issaraks* have preached not only liberation from the French, but the overthrow of a King and Government who were mere puppets of France.’⁴¹ The rising popularity of Son Ngoc Thanh and his radical brand of anti-French nationalism in the early 1950s not only overshadowed Sihanouk’s more conservative, gradualist style,⁴² but also compelled Sihanouk to abandon the sinking colonial ship, and align himself with the current of anti-French sentiments. To cut off the legacy of colonial affiliations, Sihanouk not only undertook a ‘Crusade for Independence’ against the French to capture the

⁴¹British Embassy, Rangoon, Burma Annual Review for 1953,” p.1, para 5, from Asia: Official British Documents (AOBD) 1945-65, ed. Michael Kandiah, Gillian Staerck and Christopher Staerck, Routledge, 1999

⁴² George Kahin, Southeast Asia: A Testament, Routledge Curzon, Sep 2002, p.225

initiative from other Cambodian nationalists, but even abdicated his throne two years later in order to rule independent of monarchical constraints and implications.

U Nu also chose to go his own way at times, not in terms of severing ties with his past, as Sihanouk had done, but in altering or sidestepping the ideological legacies that had been left him. For instance, Nu not only substituted Aung San's 'unity in diversity' for an approach to nation building based on assimilation; he also extended his religious beliefs into politics, whereas Aung San had urged a rigid separation between church and state. Nu saw the state's role in religion as twofold: to ensure religious freedom and to encourage religious interest to instill moral and social values to end insurgent activity.⁴³ Even though Nu generally espoused religious freedom, he also believed and advocated that Buddhism held the key to Burma's social cohesion and enhancement. As a result, his nation-wide promotion of Buddhism led to extensive pagoda-building; the hosting of the 6th Buddhist World Conference from 1954-1956 in Rangoon; and eventually, the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961. These initiatives served—whether intentionally or otherwise – to ground U Nu's political legitimacy and public image in the mold of Burma's traditional Buddhist kings and rulers; from this angle, Nu was no longer just a substitute or symbol for Aung San's vision. Although U Nu began his political career with the intention of fulfilling Aung San's goals, the methods and ideology he adopted were not always in line with his predecessor's directives.

Although both men tried to move away from past ties and influences, the reality was that their careers often had to shift and balance between the poles of tradition and

⁴³ Silverstein, *Legacy*, p.239

modernity. On one hand, the heavy legacies of the past were not entirely hindrances, as history and tradition contained ideas and images that most of their people could identify with. On the other hand, newly independent countries like Burma and Cambodia were under tremendous pressure to transcend past antiquities in order to be recognized as modern sovereign nations in a post-colonial world. This “tension” between past and present was reflected in the policies that U Nu and Sihanouk adopted. Although they introduced modern concepts such as Socialism and Neutrality into their political terminology; these present-day ideas were often guided by past ideals. ‘Neutrality’, for instance, seemed like a modern idea that developed only in the 1950s as an alternate option to taking sides in the Cold War; but neither U Nu nor Sihanouk could separate their foreign policies from historical concerns and dynamics – such as the traditional “vassal-patron” relationship between Burma and China⁴⁴, and Cambodia’s deep-rooted rivalry with Thailand and Vietnam. In terms of economic policy, U Nu’s Socialist vision of a “*Pyidawtha*”, was based on the traditional golden-age ideal of a “happy” Burmese kingdom built on Buddhist values, where there was neither lack nor sorrow. Sihanouk’s golden-age imagery hearkened to the past glories of Angkor, when Khmer civilization was highly advanced, and its rulers governed as revered and beloved god-kings. In a sense, such retrospection by both men may have led to unrealistic perceptions and unattainable goals. The concepts of Socialism and Neutrality will be further discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively, against the backdrop of how each man rose and eventually fell from power.

⁴⁴ During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) China invaded Burma three times; this was followed by another two invasions during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). And during the Qing dynasty (1636-1912) Burmese kings regularly sent tributary missions to Beijing.

The following chapter will chart how U Nu and Sihanouk grew from being mere symbols, towards becoming strongmen in their respective countries. After being thrust into prominence and transiting successfully into power, U Nu and Sihanouk began their careers with much promise and potential. Yet for both men, it took less than two decades before they were unceremoniously removed from power, pushed out even more suddenly than they had been ushered in. Were they overcome by a combination of their inherited legacies and changing political, social and economic situations? Or were the paths they charted for themselves misguided and badly navigated, thus leading them to misfortune?

Chapter 2: From Crisis to Control

Despite their success in securing independence for their respective countries, U Nu and Sihanouk were unable to consolidate their respective positions, as they still faced challenges and crises. Sihanouk, for example, had to deal with growing political uncertainty during the first year of Cambodia's Independence in 1954 as the time approached for him to hand power back to an elected assembly.¹ (Sihanouk had dissolved the Democratic government in 1952 and had governed without Parliament on the basis that decisive leadership was necessary to carry out his "Crusade for Independence.") For U Nu, the departure of the British opened the door to a series of insurrections that began with the Communists, and later, the PVO, and the Karen National Union (KNU) and its affiliated groups which did not trust their interests in the hands of a predominantly Burman government. Comparatively, the crises they faced differed in severity – Sihanouk's domestic political rivals seemed almost mild in comparison to the thousands of armed rebels who fought against U Nu's government. For both men, however, the threat of being displaced or overthrown was very real in the initial stages of their leadership.

This chapter will compare the parallel paths they took in overcoming these crises to reach respective milestones of consolidation and control. As both U Nu and Sihanouk moved from weakness to strength, their successes were often lauded as indicators that their countries had entered a new phase of nationhood; the perceived stability within their

¹ "British Embassy, Phnom Penh, Cambodia Annual Review for 1954," from Asia: Official British Documents 1945-65, ed. Michael Kandiah, Gillian Staerck and Christopher Staerck, Routledge, 1999

countries also gave them confidence to push their domestic agenda, as well as to venture into global diplomacy. One critical question is whether such confidence was misplaced from the outset; did each man merely achieve a semblance of consolidation that only papered over political problems and social divisions?

2.1 Milestones – Established Leaders

The transition from crisis to a milestone of calm and confidence was certainly noted by foreign observers in each country. In Burma, for instance, the British Foreign Office made a bleak observation in 1950 that the previous year had seen a ‘steady and general deterioration...in every aspect of Burmese internal affairs.’² This contrasted with the positive picture at the end of 1954 where there was ‘relative stability and increased security’ in Burma as compared to the previous three years of civil war and border encroachments from Chinese Nationalist KMT forces in the north. The marked change in tone and optimism suggested that Nu had somehow managed to turn his country’s fortunes around and consolidate his position, all within a span of five years.

As domestic stability increased, so did U Nu’s authority and this enabled him to exert his influence in religious and economic affairs. For instance, Burma hosted the Sixth Buddhist Synod in Rangoon on May 17, 1954 – an event which U Nu had first envisioned in 1951 as part of Burma’s Buddhist Revival.³ The event was an indication of Nu’s standing at home and in the wider Buddhist world. Similarly, as the relative stability

² “British Embassy, Rangoon, Burma Annual Review for 1949,” AOBD, para 1, 1999

³ Mendelson, E. M. Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership.

John P. Ferguson (ed.). Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 1975.p.277

allowed the government to embark upon the *Pyidawtha* (“Pleasant Royal Country”) Scheme to mold Burma into a self-supporting Welfare state, Nu’s elevated role was apparent in 1955, when he took charge of economic policy to balance Burma’s foreign budget.⁴ Such domestic consolidation fuelled confidence abroad, as 1955 marked a year, ‘more than at any other time since independence, that Burma concerned herself with international affairs.’⁵ Through a series of high profile overseas trips and visits by foreign dignitaries, U Nu’s international prestige was enhanced to a point where he could single-handedly conduct Burma’s foreign policy.⁶ This was affirmed by his contemporaries abroad who credited Nu as one of the principal conveyors and moving spirits of the landmark 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung.⁷ Given Burma’s stability and U Nu’s personal clout in the mid-1950s, the British Foreign Office could state confidently that ‘Burma... has the best Burmese Government it has ever had.’⁸

In Cambodia, the 1955 British Foreign Office report warned that Sihanouk’s three years of personal rule was nearing its end, as power was due to be returned to Parliament.⁹ Sihanouk had promised to achieve independence and internal security within three years, and had used the pervading tide of nationalistic fervor surrounding his kingship to maintain his power. Not content with remaining a constitutional monarch, Sihanouk had moved –with tacit French support –against the Democrats; he launched a political coup in June 1952, took the helm of a mission to liberate Cambodia, amended

⁴ British Embassy, 1955, AOBD, p.1 and 3, para.6, 16.

⁵ Ibid. p.1, para 1.

⁶ Ibid, p.1, para.2

⁷ Ibid, p.1 and 2, para.3, 8.

⁸ Ibid, p.3, para.11

⁹ Ibid, p.1, para.1

the constitution and generally tried to consolidate his position by increasing his hand in internal politics. Now that Sihanouk had ‘fulfilled’ his promises, he found himself facing a bleak and uncertain future. Despite his popularity, the departure of the French left the Prince vulnerable as the Democrats and other political rivals – including the jungle-based rebel Son Ngoc Thanh – seemed poised to challenge him. To make matters worse, ‘having won independence, Sihanouk was uncertain how to proceed; he had no program for governing Cambodia – no foreign policy, no priorities, no economic plans.’¹⁰

This pessimistic view contrasted with the situation 5 years later, when in December 1960, the Prince, as Cambodia’s dominant international representative, returned from official visits to Czechoslovakia, USSR, Outer Mongolia and China, having garnered warm receptions and personal promises of increased economic aid to Cambodia.¹¹ Along with major developments in infrastructure and services, Cambodia was commended in 1960 for its considerable economic progress, sound financial position, and significant increase in trade.’¹² Such relative stability and success were indicative of Sihanouk’s firm domestic standing. Earlier that same year on 20th June, about two months after his father, the King, had died, Sihanouk put an end to the debate over the issue of succession by appointing himself Chief of State for life. The fact that he did this relatively unopposed, and could even portray it unabashedly as ‘giving way to popular demand’ showed how far he had come since the tenuous years of having to share the limelight with other political rivals.

¹⁰ David Chandler, The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution since 1945, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, p.72

¹¹ British Embassy, 1960, AOBD, p.1, para 1

¹² *Ibid*, p.1, para.4

With these milestones in mind – the mid-1950s for Nu, and 1960 for Sihanouk – it becomes clear that both men had been relatively successful in consolidating power. In comparing the way and extent to which each man did this, it becomes clear how different their circumstances and personalities were on one hand, yet how similar some of the methods and vehicles they employed were on the other.

2.2 From Independence to Instability

A major turning point in U Nu and Sihanouk's respective careers was the securing of national independence. Thereafter, the level of their power and prestige, as well as the complexity of the challenges they faced, rose to new heights. In this regard, the transition from colonial rule to nationhood was a crucial period which conditioned their leadership styles and which set in motion circumstances that would influence the rest of their careers.

Sihanouk's Crusade

For instance, Sihanouk's desire to dominate Cambodia's political scene was partly a result of the personal vulnerability and political instability he experienced in the lead-up to independence. As the role of the Khmer monarchy came under increasing threat from nationalists –including party politicians, communists (Viet Minh supporters), leftist guerillas (*Khmer Issarak*) and anti-royalist rebels (*Khmer Serei*), Sihanouk embraced the goal of Cambodian Independence as a prize that would give him legitimacy over his rivals. This fervor for independence contrasted with his previous lack of interest when the Japanese had 'granted' Cambodia 'Independence' in March 1945,

when the most ‘nationalist’ act Sihanouk did was to abrogate two French laws to restore Cambodian culture– by reverting to the original Khmer alphabet and the Buddhist calendar. After the Japanese left, Sihanouk even welcomed the French back, and worked with them to outline a new constitution for Cambodia. This tone changed dramatically once Sihanouk realized that the growing nationalist movement was threatening to overtake him.

Following the French decision in 1946 to allow the Cambodians to form political parties and to hold elections for a Consultative Assembly, the resultant constitution vested powers in a popularly elected National Assembly, and reduced Sihanouk to a constitutional monarch. With his status downgraded, Sihanouk nevertheless tried to take advantage of the ineffective Parliamentary system. For instance, when the National Assembly was dissolved in September 1949, Sihanouk agreed to a French proposal for a “limited” Cambodian independence within the French Union that gave Cambodians most administrative control. Despite Sihanouk’s claim that this was tantamount to “fifty percent independence”, the treaty was never ratified by the National Assembly, and the dominant Democrats derided Sihanouk for giving in to the French.

By 1950, although the Democrats continued to be the strongest political party, the National Assembly’s weakness was noted by foreign observers, that ‘political jockeying among the parties in the Council and rivalries between Ministers continued to weaken the Government and prevent it from applying its energies to the real task in hand.’¹³ Two years later, the criticism continued that ‘the Democratic Party Government of M. Huy

¹³ British Embassy, 1950, AOBD, pp.2 and 4, para. 8, 15

Kanthoul failed altogether to live up to its promise on paper and in a riot of impotence, ineptitude and inexperience degenerated rapidly into demagogy.’¹⁴ Fearing that Son Ngoc Thanh or the underground *Khmer Issarak* movement would usurp the nationalist movement if parliamentary political infighting continued to divide the peoples’ loyalty, Sihanouk seized the initiative to rally the nation. Using his constitutional status as the ‘spiritual head of state’, Sihanouk dismissed Huy Kanthoul’s government on 15th June, formed a new ministry under his leadership to reform the country, and a year later, launched his Royal Crusade for Independence. Riding on the wave of nationalistic emotions generated by his promise to obtain full and complete independence within 3 years, Sihanouk enjoyed a relatively free hand in ruling without Parliamentary hindrances.¹⁵

In latter years, Sihanouk would claim that it was this popular mandate and his personal aggressiveness that forced the French to leave Cambodia. To his credit, Sihanouk did provide a powerful voice for Cambodia independence that caught the French by surprise, and forced them to realize belatedly that Sihanouk was no longer the subservient symbolic ruler they had earlier handpicked to legitimize colonial rule. Between February and November 1953, Sihanouk pressured the French by drawing international attention to Cambodia’s situation through overseas trips – including visits to France, US, Canada and Japan –; through dramatic and volatile anti-colonial radio broadcasts; and by mobilizing demonstrations to demand the transfer of sovereignty. Sihanouk was determined to force France to grant the same kind of independence

¹⁴ British Embassy, 1952, AOBD, pp. 2 and 6, para 6,21

¹⁵ Ibid, pp.2 and 6, para.7, 23

enjoyed by Britain's former colonies,¹⁶ no doubt drawing inspiration from the examples of India, Pakistan, and Burma.

U Nu and Sihanouk compared

Unlike Sihanouk, U Nu did not have to fight as hard to either control the tide of nationalism or secure independence. Burmese independence had already been guaranteed under the Aung San-Attlee Agreement of January 1947; after a visit by Nu to London in October for final negotiations, independence was declared on January 4, 1948. While it seemed that Sihanouk played a more pivotal role for Cambodia's independence than U Nu did for Burma, the extent of Sihanouk's contributions is debatable. When Sihanouk launched his Crusade, French regional power and presence was already declining due to their conflict with the Viet Minh. After the French government decided in July 1953 to wind up the "dirty war"¹⁷, which in turn accelerated their withdrawal from Indochina, it was a matter of time before Cambodia's independence became reality. Sihanouk's public ranting was not the reason for French capitulation; limited resources were. In this sense, Sihanouk's efforts, like U Nu's, could be considered as putting the 'final touches' to a process already initiated and well-advanced.

In this regard, the act of overseeing the transference of sovereignty by U Nu and Sihanouk could be considered more symbolic than substantial. Sihanouk's public posturing did more to create an image of himself as "Father of Independence" in Cambodia, than it did in reality to wrest his country from Colonial control; U Nu's

¹⁶ John A. Tully, France on the Mekong: A History of the Protectorate in Cambodia, 1863-1953. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003, p.478

¹⁷ Chandler, p.70

successful negotiations with the British testified to the symbolic creation of a free and united Burma, but did not change nor reflect the reality of simmering political and ethnic division in his country. In both Cambodia and Burma, the symbolic success of independence masked unresolved problems and challenges. Sihanouk's political rivals – who felt they had as much, if not more, claim to Cambodia's independent future – remained as undercurrents that would eventually challenge him. In Burma, the facade of unity that the AFPFL, its opponents and the various rival ethnic and political groups, had put up to convince Britain that Burma was ready for independence,¹⁸ was no longer cemented by the common goal of independence, and was ready to crumble.

Although Sihanouk's struggles to outmaneuver other nationalists and secure Independence contrasted with U Nu's relatively straightforward task, Nu differed from Sihanouk in the *aftermath* of Independence, when Burma faced much greater instability than in Cambodia. Where Sihanouk had been conditioned during his "fight" for Independence, Nu was molded by the chaos he faced in post-colonial Burma. What they had in common, however, were the real challenges that emerged once the symbolic glow of independence wore off.

Although each man stamped his political authority through his initial successes, the conclusion of the national quest for independence also opened the way for political infighting and instability. Up till then, both men had enjoyed tacit support, tolerance and even justification of their policies and positions.

¹⁸ Richard Butwell, U Nu of Burma, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969, 2nd ed), p.47

U Nu's Crises

After Independence had been achieved in Burma, not only was U Nu unable to step down within the first six months as he intended, but he found himself entangled in a struggle to preserve the fragile unity that Aung San had pulled together. Independence marked the beginning of Burma's tragedy, as the government did not have the administrative experience or strategy to handle ethnic diversity and political fragmentation. Martin Smith stated that 'few countries have had a more perilous transition to independence than Burma.'¹⁹ Independence arrived with the Red Flags of Thakin Soe and various Arakanese and Mujahid guerillas already in the field; in March 1948, the CPB's mainstream White Flag faction under Than Tun went into open revolt. The communist uprising split the Peoples Volunteer Organization (PVO) – Burma's diverse home guard that had previously been held together by Aung San's leadership – and sixty per cent of the PVO defected to join the rebels in May.²⁰ Despite U Nu's efforts to negotiate a 15-point Leftist Unity Plan in May 1948 to retain the PVO remnants and to woo the underground Communists, he met with a lukewarm response as ideological and personal differences between rebel leaders and the dominantly Socialist government proved too wide to bridge successfully. Instead, the defections continued, as the All Burma Youth League decided to withdraw from the AFPFL in December 1948 to avoid the increasing politicking. Two months later, the crisis escalated exponentially when the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO) – organized by the Karen National Union (KNU) resorted to armed revolt over the unresolved issue of an independent Karen state.

¹⁹ Smith, p.102

²⁰ Josef Silverstein (ed.), The political legacy of Aung San. Rev. (ed.), Southeast Asia Program Series, no. 11. Ithaca, N.Y: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University. 1993, p.346

Faced with a series of insurrections, and further assailed by a nationwide Ministerial Services Union strike that began on February 7 and which soon spread to students and the Railway Union, ‘U Nu called February, March and April, 1949, the bleakest months; “All of us were kept in a terrible state of suspense.” He estimated that there were 10,000 rebels in the field in both the Communist and KNDO insurrections, about half of these deserters from the Army, police and other services. The authority of Nu’s government literally ended in the outlying suburbs of Rangoon, and at one point did not even include the whole of the capital city itself. For most of Burma, there was no government.’²¹

Sihanouk’s Challenges

Compared to U Nu’s post-Independence crises, Sihanouk’s domestic problems seemed trivial, but still posed a challenge. Despite stamping his political authority by “winning” independence for the country, Sihanouk still faced dissension and uncertainty. In 1954, a British diplomat noted that ‘the popularity of the regime began to diminish through lack of public confidence in the oligarchy of Ministers and Privy councilors, nominees of the King or of the Queen Mother, who have been its instruments since the suspension of responsible government in June 1952.’²² Furthermore, the Democrats still had in mind a Cambodian political system that would relegate the monarch to a

²¹ Butwell, p.105

²² FO, 1954, pt.11

secondary position.²³ As patience from other political players towards Sihanouk wore thin, the politician-King realized he had to further consolidate his position.

2.3 Conciliation and Consolidation

As their respective countries moved from independence to instability, Nu tried to bring about conciliation between divisive forces and Sihanouk sought to consolidate his leadership. U Nu's goal was to appease the various factions' anger and distrust toward the Burmese government, and to prevent the disintegration of the Union; Sihanouk aimed to cement his position in Cambodian politics by quelling parliamentary and party opposition. Naturally, conciliation led to consolidation and vice versa; U Nu's push for national unity and cooperation helped firm up his position and indispensability, and Sihanouk's push to suppress the voices of dissension resulted in seeming – albeit temporary – consensus and harmony in Cambodian politics. For both, however, their efforts were often reactive and impulsive, borne out of instinct, intuition and immediate necessity rather than long-term planning and foresight.

U Nu: Conciliation and Compromise

U Nu's instinctive response was to prevent armed rebellion through compromise and negotiation rather than force, but his good intentions ultimately proved futile. This was evident in his engagement with the CPB, the PVO defectors, and the Karens. The CPB had accused the Socialist-dominated AFPFL of producing only a 'sham independence' that 'betrayed' Burma's sovereignty; the PVO majority (65%) faction that defected ("White Band" PVO) were unhappy at their demobilization and decline in

²³ Osborne, p.82

political importance.²⁴ To appease both parties and maintain unity, Nu called for a new Socialist Party-PVO-CPB coalition; he tried to woo the PVOs who had defected, through a 15-point Leftist Unity Programme proposing increased socialism and closer relations with the Soviet Union and the eastern European countries. As a last resort, Nu even offered to resign as Prime Minister and AFPFL President if the various factions could agree on a peaceful solution. Unfortunately, the talks failed amidst irreconcilable positions and the would-be rebels' decision to strike while the Burmese government was still weak. The CPB took an increasingly militant line in backing mass strikes and mobilizing armed personnel; and in late March 1948, the White Flags Communists (led by Than Tun) broke negotiations and went into open rebellion. Four months later, the PVO also chose to rebel.

Even after talks had failed, Nu's hope for a negotiated settlement with the Communists lasted into 1949,²⁵ but despite a series of conciliatory gestures such as offers of government posts, and the promise of early elections, Nu failed to persuade the rebels to lay down their arms. Nu attributed his own tendency to 'let the enemy strike him four or five times before he retaliated'²⁶ to his indecision and lack of firmness; and it was perhaps this factor that delayed a conclusive solution to Burma's mounting security problems. Nu would only adopt force as a last resort; this was also evident in his approach to the Karen issue.

²⁴ Butwell, p.101

²⁵ Ibid, p.97

²⁶ U Nu, Saturday's Son, New Haven: Connecticut, London: Yale University Press, 1975,p.145

The Karens had never accepted the provisions for a Karen State under the terms of the 1947 Constitution²⁷ so Nu tried to negotiate a peaceful solution with the KNU and its leader, Saw Ba U Gyi. Despite increasing evidence of Karen militia and KNDO operations, U Nu toured the Lower Delta regions with Ba U Gyi to try to stem the threat of communal war through dissuasion and discussion, such that ‘his efforts for Karen-Burman unity earned him the uncomplimentary nickname of “Karen Nu”’.²⁸ Even after the situation deteriorated to the point of a KNU-led KNDO open rebellion in January, 1949, Nu still tried to ease tensions through radio and press statements, calling for calm and non-retaliation from the Burmans.

Nu persisted in trying to achieve a peaceful solution – he continued to offer amnesty and negotiation to rebels in exchange for surrender of arms; but faced with opponents who were ‘determined to force the issue’, Nu decided ‘he would meet force with force.’²⁹ In the second half of 1948, Nu formed auxiliary defence groups – which numbered over 100 by year’s end – known as the *Sitwundans* (“peace guerillas”), for territorial and rear deployment.³⁰ To bolster his poorly-equipped forces, Nu requested military and financial assistance from abroad – in particular India.³¹ Under the ‘uncompromising personality’ of the new Army Chief-of-Staff, General Ne Win³² who

²⁷ Martin Smith, Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity, London: Zed Books. 1991, p.110

²⁸ Butwell, p.104

²⁹ U Nu, p.147

³⁰ Smith, p.116

³¹ British Embassy, 1949, AOBD ,pp.1,2, para 3, 6

³² Smith, p.121

took advantaged of the rebels' lack of coordination,³³ the better organized Burmese troops began to retake key areas. Throughout, Nu still tried to avoid violence– for instance, by his own account he tried to persuade an army commander to avoid killing PVO rebels by controlling their artillery fire.³⁴ Nu justified his use of force through the life stories of a Buddha-to-be, Mahawthada, who had said he would only ‘wage war in defence of the realm and its people, and to protect them against harm and not for self-aggrandizement.’³⁵

As U Nu hesitated and gave leeway to the rebels in the hope for a peaceful resolution, the result was a Burmese government constantly reacting to, rather than decisively dealing with, the insurgents. More than once, Nu stalled over warning signs of impending violence and only took forceful measures after his opponents struck first. This repeated surrender of initiative may have allowed the rebellions to drag on, which in turn distracted the Burmese government from formulating pre-emptive or long-term solutions to address the root causes of division.

Sihanouk: Consolidation and Confrontation

In comparison, Sihanouk had no qualms about seizing initiatives, or adopting forceful measures for self-aggrandizement. In taking pre-emptive steps to consolidate his power, he displayed a ruthlessness that U Nu lacked, and a belief in his indispensability

³³ See Smith, Chpt 7: “Failure, Retrenchment and United Fronts: the Communist Movement, 1948-52”, pp. 122-136, for an account of how and why the CPB, claiming opposition to the AFPFI, was ‘unable to seize power at what most observers would agree was undoubtedly the most opportune moment. The CPB’s failure stands in stark contrast to the experiences of communist parties in neighbouring countries, eg. Cambodia, in the same post-war period’ (p.121)

³⁴ U Nu, pp.161-162

³⁵ Ibid. pp.147-148

that contrasted with Nu's ever-willingness to exit the scene if that could pave the way for political conciliation.

Unlike U Nu, Sihanouk did not have to deal with armed insurgencies, but he still faced resurgent political opposition. The 1954 Geneva Conference that decided the fate of Indochina after French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, had left Cambodia's territorial integrity intact and did not give special rights to its leftist rebels – unlike Vietnam and Laos –; but it did schedule a Cambodian General Election.³⁶ Sihanouk's political opponents – including the Democrats, Communists, and Son Ngoc Thanh's forces – planned to use the elections to reduce the King's power. 'Against all this, the seven or eight parties led by friends and associates of the King had no chance of obtaining a majority. There was further danger that before long, the common people would lose patience with the corruption and self-seeking of professional politicians in general.'³⁷ To reverse this dismal forecast, Sihanouk undertook a series of high-handed initiatives. These included, conducting a national referendum to build his political base and legitimacy, abdicating his throne to participate more freely and fully in politics, forming his own movement to subsume and suppress political alternatives, and even clamping down on the press.

³⁶ Milton Osborne, Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness, (NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin), 1994, p.88

³⁷ "British Embassy, 1955," AOBD , p.1, para 2,

On 7 February 1955, Sihanouk submitted his recent 'Royal Crusade' to a national referendum; the result was an overwhelming affirmation of his leadership and policies.³⁸ To gain this result, however, the referendum had been staged as a vote for or against Cambodia's monarchy; hardly a fair choice for the majority of Cambodians that revered the country's royal traditions and institutions. Following this victory, Sihanouk arrested the editors of several Khmer newspapers that had challenged his claim to have won true and complete independence for Cambodia in 1953.

Despite these advances, Sihanouk remained 'distracted that his popularity might be manufactured and was frightened of being cast aside by the political parties in the unavoidable elections.'³⁹ To 'take command of Cambodian politics and cease being merely a ceremonial ruler',⁴⁰ Sihanouk abdicated his 14-year kingship on 2 March, 1955. The move surprised even his parents, but effectively freed Sihanouk from the labels and technical trappings of the monarchy, and allowed him to engage in politics without fear of being criticized by those who felt a king should remain symbolic and apolitical. Furthermore, by allowing his father, Suramarit, to become king, Sihanouk did not have to fear another person would abuse the throne for political power.

With his newfound political freedom, Sihanouk began to prepare for the elections scheduled for September 1955. In early April, he formed a broad national political movement, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (People's Socialist Community) that sought to submerge party differences by requiring members to 'abjure' membership in other

³⁸ Osborne, p.89

³⁹ Chandler, p.78

⁴⁰ Ibid.

political groups. With loyalty to the throne and to Sihanouk's policies as the only requirements for membership, the organization aimed at being broad and flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of political opinion.⁴¹ Through this, Sihanouk hoped to achieve both conciliation and consolidation; first by containing differing voices within a mass movement, then by uniting these voices in common support for him. These aims came closer to reality during the September elections, when, under the auspices of terror tactics and widespread corruption, the Sangkum won 83 per cent of the votes cast, thereby ensuring the National Assembly would almost entirely be made up of Sihanouk's supporters. At the close of 1955, Sihanouk was "credited" with having 'dealt with the problem of making democracy work without giving up personal power.'⁴² The decisive election results were a culmination of Sihanouk's efforts to take over Cambodian politics and proved a turning point for his career.

Turning Points

U Nu's turning point was in 1950, when the threats of insurrection and political disintegration were significantly reduced. In January, the Socialists and Yellow-Band PVOs returned to the Cabinet⁴³ (they had withdrawn from the government the previous year when U Nu refused to bring some rebel leaders into the government.⁴⁴) In March, the PVO broke alliance with the Communists, thereby reducing the threat of a potentially dangerous combination. In August, the Karen (KNU) leader Saw Ba U Gyi was ambushed and killed by an army patrol. By the end of the year, all but one of the

⁴¹ Osborne, p.93

⁴² British Embassy, 1955, AOBD, p.1, para.1

⁴³ Smith, p.121

⁴⁴ Silverstein, p.354

administrative headquarter towns, along with many of the smaller towns and the main lines of communication were again in government hands⁴⁵ and observers noted that ‘the authority of Thakin Nu and his supporters was more firmly established than at any time since they assumed office.’⁴⁶

This positive turn in events was partly brought about, ironically, by U Nu’s failed attempts at conciliation. With regards to the rebels, failed negotiations opened the way for the Burmese government to adopt more forceful – and effective – measures against the insurgents. Within the AFPFL and central government, U Nu’s inability to prevent the mass defections and political infighting, left him as the central figure. Despite such “prominence by default”, Nu’s presence, nevertheless provided the Burmese Union with a rallying symbol and the leadership necessary to tide through its early trials. Richard Butwell applauded Nu for his ‘survival and assertive performance as Burma’s leader’ despite the fact that his tenure in office was due primarily to the impossibility of finding a successor acceptable to the different groups (the Socialists, the PVO, the minority peoples and the Communists) involved in the Burma’s turbulent political process.⁴⁷ Martin Smith, too, attributed the survival of the Burmese government in 1948-52 to Nu, who, ‘despite frequent threats to resign, appeared at times to be single-handedly keeping together a viable government coalition in Rangoon.’⁴⁸

⁴⁵ FO 1951 p.5

⁴⁶ FO, 1950, pt.1

⁴⁷ Butwell, p.99

⁴⁸ Smith, p.120

Comparatively, Sihanouk – as the dominant force in the majority Sangkum party – also seemed to be the central figure keeping the Cambodian government together after the 1955 elections. Observers noted that ‘the force which holds the Sangkum together...is the personality of Prince Sihanouk himself. So long as he was leading the Government, his popularity diverted whatever disapproval some of their actions might incur’ and that ‘when the time came for a government to be formed it was obvious that no one else could command the allegiance of more than a fraction of the Sangkum elite, who were as ready to fall out among themselves as Cambodian politicians have ever been.’⁴⁹ Like U Nu, Sihanouk had faced the risk of political infighting; where they differed, however, was that Sihanouk did not negotiate or compromise with his opponents. Rather, by continually seizing the initiative and placing himself at the forefront of Cambodian political processes, Sihanouk left his opponents little room to maneuver. After the 1955 elections, for instance, many Democrats were cowed into joining the Sangkum and ceased to be a viable threat to Sihanouk by 1956.⁵⁰ Sihanouk further conceived the idea of a twice-yearly Congress of the Sangkum, which was in theory based on “ancient Greek democracy”, but proved to be a stage-managed way of neutralising political opposition.⁵¹ Through the Sangkum, a political vehicle driven by the sheer force of his personality, Sihanouk overwhelmed and contained the diverse political voices and ambitions within Cambodia, thereby bringing a semblance of conciliation to the political scene surrounding his consolidated position. On October 2, 1955, Sihanouk capped the year’s achievements when he became both Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.

⁴⁹ British Embassy, 1955, AOBD, p.6

⁵⁰ Chandler, p.85

⁵¹ Osborne, p.99

Assessment

Although both U Nu and Sihanouk had surmounted domestic problems to reach unprecedented plateaus of stability and strength, their positions were established on weak foundations. It is arguable that U Nu and Sihanouk's attempts at consolidating power, while seemingly successful, were neither conclusive nor sustainable.

For instance, Sihanouk's popularity managed only to *divert* or temporarily contain dissension. His consolidation of personal power was achieved less through consensus-building than it was through the undermining of other political forces. Sihanouk truly believed that his "relationship" with the masses kept him above the fray of political infighting. As Sihanouk placed his faith in this political base and sought to develop his personal influence into an institutionalized autocracy, the political system he built around his popularity bolstered his self-belief and numbed him to the possibility and signs of domestic unrest that would later emerge.

U Nu, too, had provided a temporary solution by quelling the violence and bringing a semblance of peace to Burma, but he had not been able to formulate a viable long-term policy to cultivate national unity. Nu had tried to build consensus through a combination of acquiescence, appeasement, and ultimately, threat of aggression, but the fundamental division between Burma's political center with non-Burmans and leftists could not be resolved conclusively. More forebodingly, it was during this period that the Burmese army grew as a force that would later see itself as an alternative to the inefficient civilian government.

Despite these foreboding indicators which only become apparent with the benefit of hindsight, U Nu and Sihanouk did manage to tide through periods of uncertainty and this in turn emboldened them to take greater personal control in domestic and foreign policies.

2.4 Confident Leadership - Venture into Socialism and Neutralism

After consolidating their positions, both U Nu and Sihanouk sought to advance specific ideologies that became trademarks of their respective countries' development during the 1950s and 60s. During this time, although both continued to face various levels of domestic and cross-border instability, their improved control at home gave them more confidence to advance their agenda in both domestic and foreign policy.

U Nu: Political Stability

In Burma, 1951 was a year of significant progress in the restoration of political and economic stability. During the year's elections, the better-organized AFPFL combined the aura of Aung San's name with Nu's rising popularity to win 75% of the majority vote.⁵² By late 1951, the weakened rebels no longer stood as alternatives to the AFPFL Government, and with a fresh electoral mandate, Burmese leaders could begin to plan for the future instead of improvising from day to day.⁵³ With more peaceful conditions, acreage under cultivation began to rise, and work could be resumed on the solution of Burma's economic problems.⁵⁴ Observers in Burma that year noted that 'the

⁵² Hugh Tinker, The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence. 3rd ed. Oxford:University Press. 1961, p.72

⁵³ Ibid, p.49

⁵⁴ Butwell, p.112.

government of Thakin Nu, drawing fresh confidence from its new-found constitutionality, may now feel better able to carry out more vigorous policies both of pacification and reconstruction.’⁵⁵

U Nu began by re-stating the goal of building a Socialist Welfare State through ethical and moral transformation of the people. In a 1951 speech, U Nu highlighted moral reform as one of the ‘the five main pillars of Health, Education, Morals, Economics and National Solidarity which must support a nation.’⁵⁶ He even considered promoting a Buddhist revival that would give birth to the moral transformation he believed was necessary for economic progress. Nu’s belief that collective social values could transform political and economic realities would later extend into foreign policy in his attempts to correct the global prejudices; but at the beginning of the 1950s, Nu continued to follow the line of relatively passive neutrality that was modeled after India’s foreign policy. At that point, ‘Burma’s attention was too much pre-occupied with internal problems for her to devote much time to international affairs; she was again more a spectator than an active participant.’⁵⁷

One such internal problem was the presence of over 2000 KMT Chinese soldiers in the Shan State on Burma’s eastern frontier, who had sought refuge there since 1950 to attack the Chinese communist forces in Yunnan. To reduce the risk of spillover conflict, the Burmese military tried to drive the KMT forces out, while U Nu tried to reach a political solution with Taiwan Nationalist and Chinese Communist leaders. At the end of

⁵⁵ British Embassy, 1951, AOBD , pp. 2 and 4, para 11,21

⁵⁶ “The Task Before Us”, Convocation Address by Prime Minister U Nu of Burma at the University of Rangoon, December 22, 1951

⁵⁷ British Embassy 1951 AOBD , p.1, para.5

1952, the Prime Minister declared that the insurrection was '95 per cent finished'.⁵⁸ This claim was given further weight in 1953, when the United Nations passed a resolution mandating KMT withdrawal from Burma. (With hindsight however, Nu's optimism in the early 1950s was misplaced, as the problem continued to pose a risk Burma's security for the rest of his tenure.)

Politically, U Nu grew increasingly secure in his position at the head of a coalition government comprising the Burma Socialist Party (BSP) and a number of Independents, such that by 1953, he was acknowledged as the 'personality that held the coalition together, and guided it in major matters.'⁵⁹ That same year, as the government became more stable, Burma played a more active role in the international sphere than in the past.⁶⁰ For instance, while continuing to project and promote her status of neutrality and non-alignment, Burma also became an advocate of Socialism, by holding the Asian Socialist Conference in Rangoon. By 1955, this role expanded even further in inverse proportion to its domestic troubles; as the threat of insurrection was reduced, Burma's government adopted a more active role in foreign affairs, and U Nu began efforts to mediate between the leading nations of the two Cold War blocs.⁶¹

In essence, as the 1950s commenced, U Nu found his political footing and began to enforce his agenda in various spheres. Domestically, he set in motion a developmental plan based on socialist principles and the models of a welfare state that would be created

⁵⁸ British Embassy 1953 AOBD, p.1, para.3

⁵⁹ Ibid, para.6

⁶⁰ Ibid, para.4

⁶¹ Butwell, p.190

by a united Burmese people motivated by moral and cultural convictions. In foreign affairs, he encouraged the promotion of international socialism and also a status of neutrality that encouraged all-round international goodwill without siding with positions or blocs that would antagonize others.⁶² In both areas, the policies adopted were identified very largely with the personal philosophy of U Nu – such as his belief in socialist principles, and also his genuine and fervent religious piety.

Sihanouk: Dominant Personality

Such a reflection of personality onto policies was also evident in Sihanouk's leadership. Once consolidated in power, the choices and consequences of his policies were often linked to his personality and beliefs. This was noted by observers in Cambodia who noted in 1956, the 'strong reflection of the strong personality and prestige of Prince Sihanouk' and stated that 'the country's continued instability, both in internal and external affairs, is largely attributable to the vagaries of the Prince's character.'⁶³

Internally, Sihanouk's impatience and self-indulgence had aggravated the problem of governmental instability. For instance, within the span of one year, five different governments took office in succession, two of them headed by the Prince himself.⁶⁴ The rapid turnover in leadership was due to the inefficiency and corruption within the *Sangkum's* administration, and also to its President, Sihanouk's impatience for results, and his misguided choice of Cambodia's public servants. Externally, 1956 marked the increase of cross-border tensions between Cambodia and its historically

⁶² Tinker, p.337

⁶³ British Embassy, 1956, AOBD, minutes

⁶⁴ Ibid.

antagonistic neighbours; relations with South Vietnam soured over the issues of troop incursions into Cambodia, and also that of trade restrictions. Thailand and Cambodia were also 'unable to reconcile their positions over a remote but religiously important temple on the frontier'⁶⁵. Two years later, in November 1959, diplomatic relations with Thailand were broken off. Cambodia's ill relations with its neighbours were partly due to Sihanouk's suspicious nature; Sihanouk was convinced that Thailand and South Vietnam were conspiring with the Khmer Serei against him. He also posed domination by the Vietnamese as the ultimate threat to Cambodia, knowing full well that 'resentment and fear of the Vietnamese was more potent to raise emotion in Cambodian breasts than fear of Communism.'⁶⁶

Despite signs of government and border instability in the late 1950s, Sihanouk's popularity and self-belief continued to grow. Like U Nu, Sihanouk looked past his domestic problems and endeavored to make an impact on the international scene. Even as the government changed hands again, and Sihanouk decided to step down as Prime Minister in October 1956, he hinted, when relinquishing the post, that he felt that he was 'destined for some important international role.'⁶⁷ By this time, Sihanouk had grown in his conviction that the neutrality Cambodia had adopted in 1954 was beneficial, not only in managing relations with the great powers, but also for the purpose of exerting leverage and influence within the international sphere. Upon Cambodia's admission to the United Nations in December 1955, Sihanouk had reinforced his country's neutralist policy by stating that: "Cambodia wishes for friendly and diplomatic relations with all countries

⁶⁵ British Embassy 1957, AOBD pp.3,4, para.9,14

⁶⁶ British Embassy 1956, AOBD p.2, para.6

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.2, para.7

which respect its sovereignty, its integrity and its ideal of peace; in general it will align its foreign policy with that of India and Burma;...”⁶⁸ From this statement, Cambodia seemed to follow in Burma’s footsteps, even in endorsing the Five Points of Nehru and Zhou En-lai. In practice, however – as detailed in Chapter 4 –Sihanouk’s “neutrality” differed from U Nu’s.

What Sihanouk had in common with U Nu, however, was the increased boldness to project himself abroad after achieving domestic stability. Between 1954 to 1960, Sihanouk increasingly promoted his person and opinions on the world stage; he attended the Bandung Conference on non-alignment in 1954, visited various European countries in 1956 to proclaim his country’s neutrality, and in turn received visits from influential leaders – including Zhou En-lai in 1956 and 1960, and the Presidents of India and Indonesia in 1959. Sihanouk even attempted to intervene in Laos’ political difficulties with the communist Pathet Lao forces, proposing at the United Nations that Laos and Cambodia form a neutral zone guaranteed by both Cold War blocs. At this point, Sihanouk did not reveal the extent of the vindictiveness, volatility and aggressive posturing that would characterize his foreign policy in the 1960s. This period, nevertheless, provided him a sense of importance that would fuel his ambition for international prestige.

Another area Sihanouk seemed to mirror U Nu was in his decision to embark on a program of “Khmer Socialism” in March 1956. From one perspective, Sihanouk’s “Socialism” was similar to U Nu’s as an economic policy incorporating state intervention

⁶⁸ British Embassy 1955, AOBD,p.2, para.9

to increase national production by which the country would learn to ‘stand on its own feet’.⁶⁹ During the 1960s, Sihanouk would even term this policy, “Buddhist Socialism”, as U Nu had done. Unlike U Nu’s sincere understanding and approach however, becoming a Socialist was Sihanouk’s way of keeping up to date with his new friends – Sukarno, Nehru, Zhou Enlai – rather than a response to ideological convictions.⁷⁰ As in the case of neutralism, Sihanouk’s version of ‘Buddhist Socialism’ – to be discussed in Chapter 4 – differed from U Nu’s.

Sihanouk and U Nu were alike, however, in that their policies reflected their increase in power and prestige. In their choice of foreign policy – Neutralism –, and economic policy – Socialism –, the common emphasis was on national self-reliance. As they consolidated their positions, both U Nu and Sihanouk projected their confidence through policies that symbolized their countries’ ability to chart independent paths.

Career Milestones

This display of confidence reflected the heights to which their personal careers had reached. Sihanouk’s career milestone as mentioned earlier in this chapter, was in 1960, when his popularity reached its peak. At this point, power had not yet fully corrupted him, his parents still exercised a moderating influence over him, and opposition to his leadership was disorganized and mute.⁷¹ Following King Suramarit’s death in

⁶⁹ British Embassy 1959, AOBD, p.2, para.9

⁷⁰ Chandler, p.87

⁷¹ Ibid, p.89

April that year, Sihanouk reached the ‘apogee of his power’⁷² two months later by declaring himself chief-of state.

Comparatively, U Nu’s career milestone was marked less by a declaration of personal power, and more by a declaration of public peace in 1955, that the ‘insurrections had faded away to dacoity’.⁷³ Unlike Sihanouk, whose extent of consolidation was based on the extent of personal control, U Nu’s efforts were reflected in the state of his country and government. ‘When it is recalled that in 1949, the authority of the Government ended in the outlying suburbs of Rangoon, and that the whole machinery of law and order was obliterated throughout the land by the havoc of the rebels, then the subsequent recovery and return to near-stability is seen as an achievement.’⁷⁴

At the height of their power, both U Nu and Sihanouk were expected to deliver the solutions to their countries’ woes: Nu had temporarily quelled the rebellion and infighting and the next step was to develop a lasting peace and national unity for Burma; Sihanouk had won his country’s independence, had united Cambodian politics and power under his persona, and now surely had the means to guide the nation safely through the escalating Cold War. Furthermore, both had promised that “Socialism” would lead to economic prosperity, and were internationally regarded for their seemingly pacifist choice of “Neutrality”. Based on current status and past achievements, hopes were high that U Nu and Sihanouk would only climb to greater heights. Unfortunately, as their visions and promises remained unfulfilled, and as geo-political factors worked against

⁷² Osborne, p.121

⁷³ Tinker, p.60

⁷⁴ Ibid, p.61

them, the subsequent years were, for both U Nu and Sihanouk, a time of strife, and ultimately, decline from power.

Chapter 3: From Success to Signs of Crises

By consolidating domestic support and stability, both U Nu and Sihanouk had, in their respective situations, achieved some personal success; but these early victories eventually gave way to periods of political and economic problems. Faced with subsequent combinations of internal and external pressures, neither U Nu nor Sihanouk could capitalize on their initial success to grow the seeds of the ideals and intentions they had sown during the fresh years of independence.

Signs of Success

The early successes for both men were evident in their ability to consolidate their political positions. U Nu overcame the odds when he endured the storm of Burma's civil war and managed to restore some semblance of order to his country. At the peak of his prominence and prestige in 1955, U Nu was even included in the distinguished company of Nehru and Mao as the "Great Men of Asia" in Guy Wint's *Spotlight on Asia*.¹ For Sihanouk, the three years since becoming Chief of State saw him 'rule Cambodia with confidence and brio.' Until the end of 1963, there were no major political crises and the Sangkum's institutions seemed sufficient for managing Cambodia.² His opponents, such as the communists, and the former Democrats maintained a low profile, and at the end of

¹ Guy Wint, *Spotlight on Asia*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth and Baltimore, 1955

² David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution since 1945*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, p.117

1962, foreign observers stated that ‘his personal domination of every aspect of Cambodian life was as strong as, if not stronger than ever.’³

Another strong – but later misleading – indicator of U Nu and Sihanouk’s success was the high personal popularity they each drew from the grassroots. Writing in 1958, Frank Trager attributed Nu’s immense political popularity to his “sincere and informed piety, and his consummate ability to speak to the ludu (the people) in terms they understand and appreciate.”⁴ This was similar to Sihanouk’s political style of using his personality to build rapport with his ‘children’ or the ‘petit peuple’ – through tours of the countryside where he would explain policies or provide entertaining monologues. Although both U Nu and Sihanouk drew initial inspiration and self-belief from their connection with the people, it was also in the public sphere that they faced the first signs of instability and disapproval.

Opposition Grows

In U Nu’s case, this took place in 1956, when the elections for the Chamber of Deputies revealed that the government – based on its record for the past 8 years – had declined in popularity. Although victory was clear – it won 47.9 percent of the popular vote (as opposed to 49.5 percent in 1951) – the AFPFL was alarmed that its majority in

³ “British Embassy, Phnom Penh, Cambodia Annual Review for 1962, para 2,” from Asia: Official British Documents 1945-65, ed. Michael Kandiah, Gillian Staerck and Christopher Staerck, Routledge, 1999

⁴ Frank N. Trager, “The Political Split in Burma” Far Eastern Survey, Vol. 27, No. 10. (Oct., 1958), p.146

many districts was so slim.⁵ Opposition to Sihanouk came in February 1963, when a conflict between high school students and police in Siem Reap developed into a demonstration accusing the Sangkum of corruption and injustice. Such an unprecedented public outcry against the Sangkum shocked the Cambodian government and the Sangkum-dominated cabinet resigned to accept responsibility for the disorder. Although these separate developments in Burma and Cambodia seemed trivial, they were indicators of unresolved problems, and also the first signs of the stagnation that was to come.

Both men took steps to reverse the slide. Concerned with the reduced confidence in the government and the AFPFL's disunity, U Nu decided to step down as Prime Minister in June 1956 for a year to take full control of the League to reform it at all levels. Sihanouk, inherently combative, and over-sensitive to any form of opposition, was triggered by the 1963 demonstrations into launching 'government sponsored terror' against real and imagined radicals that lasted over the next few years. Despite these efforts, however, neither man could stem the eventual slide from their initial successes.

Slide from Success

In U Nu's case, problems emerged in the form of political infighting that resurfaced in 1956. Although U Nu remained the most popular statesman in Burma, he was only considered one among equals by his comrades within the Thakin movement. This difference in public and inner-circle sentiments resulted in friction with other

⁵ Janet Welsh, "Burma's Development Problems" Far Eastern Survey, Vol. 25, No. 8. (Aug. 1956), p.113

colleagues.⁶ It did not help that the profiles and ambitions of other Thakins, were also increasing. For instance, the stature of U Ba Swe – the replacement Prime Minister and one who had long been alleged to harbor a desire to oust Nu as Premier⁷ – ‘rose considerably after his active participation in the November meeting of four of the Colombo powers.’⁸ That same year, friction also increased between U Nu and deputy PM U Kyaw Nyein as evidenced in an angry and petty exchange of private letters between the two.⁹ (When the AFPFL split in 1958 Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein led the opposing faction.) By 1957, Nu seemed exhausted by the political struggles that had rendered his government ineffective. He was described as one who ‘seems to have given up as hopeless the task he undertook while out of office of reforming the corruption, jobbery and lack of drive and public spirit in the government bloc.’¹⁰

Sihanouk’s political problems developed as a result of his growing inability to discern the changes in demands and discontentment even amongst those he considered closest to him. Although the 1963 crackdown campaign was aimed at leftist radicals, it also created fear and resentment in student circles, and the harsh restrictions on activism and public debate led many young people to join the underground Communist movement.¹¹ With the communists driven underground, and the voices of opposition

⁶ Trager, Far Eastern Survey, pp. 145-155

⁷ Richard Butwell, U Nu of Burma, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969, 2nd ed), p.153

⁸ Josef Silverstein, “Politics, Parties and National Elections in Burma” in Far Eastern Survey, Vol. 25, No.12. (Dec., 1956), p.183

⁹ Trager, p.146

¹⁰ “British Foreign Office, Rangoon, Burma Annual Review for 1957, para 1,” from Asia: Official British Documents 1945-65, ed. Michael Kandiah, Gillian Staerck and Christopher Staerck, Routledge, 1999

¹¹ Chandler, p.130

stifled for the next few years, Sihanouk remained convinced that his leadership remained vital to the country's survival. By engineering circumstances that reinforced his self-belief in his dominance, Sihanouk remained out of touch with the reality and extent of political dissension that was brewing.

Political opposition towards U Nu and Sihanouk was also fueled by increasing frustrations over the lack of economic progress. When the Burmese Pyidawtha Government announced the Four-Year Plan – a revision and implementation of the old Eight-Year Plan – in 1956, it was an acknowledgement that the previous economic programs had failed to change the traditional socio-economic system. The new developmental approaches selected – such as limiting the scope of state intervention in sectors of the economy – were in part, responses to the failures of the 1952-56 plan period. As U Nu publicly admitted, that ‘because of our intense enthusiasm to achieve these ends (of a socialist welfare state) in the quickest possible time we have committed several blunders.’¹² These blunders included an over-anxiety to reach the unrealistic goal of self-sufficiency, inability to maintain internal law and order, and a miscalculation of time required for development.

Sihanouk also had to face the reality of limited economic progress. Widespread bureaucratic mismanagement and corruption exacerbated the mounting budget deficit. Furthermore, the earlier years of ‘quiet progress’¹³ – in fields such as education, agriculture, housing and town-planning – had not translated into material success for the

¹² Mya Maung, “Socialism and Economic Development of Burma” in Asian Survey, Vol. 4, No. 12. (Dec., 1964), pp. 1187-1188

¹³ British Foreign Office, 1961, para 2

general public. Ironically, the expansion of educational facilities had not only failed to be matched by a similar rise in employment opportunities, but had awakened more Cambodians towards social inequality and injustice.

Although Sihanouk tried to balance the budget deficit by shifting emphasis from development to production,¹⁴ his 1963 decisions to move Cambodia towards economic self-reliance by suspending aid from the US (in turn fuelled by Sihanouk's aim to remain neutral in the face of war in Vietnam) and by nationalizing Cambodia's main industries, proved disastrous.¹⁵ Cambodia's economy was unable to adjust to the loss of American aid and budgetary support.¹⁶ By 1966, a combination of factors, including excessive government expenditure, reduced trade, public corruption, and a poor harvest in 1965, saddled Cambodia with serious financial difficulties. By 1966 too, even the usually insulated Cambodian elite 'had a strong sense that their personal economic position was endangered, and that Sihanouk was to blame.'¹⁷

Apart from political and economic difficulties, U Nu and Sihanouk also found their respective efforts to strengthen their nations' security, grinding to a standstill.

¹⁴ Ibid, 1962, para 6

¹⁵ Jean-Pierre Simon, "Cambodia: Pursuit of Crisis" in Asian Survey, Vol. 5, No. 1, A Survey of Asia in 1964: Part I. (Jan., 1965), p.53 – '1964 saw the implementation of Cambodia's economic reform program announced by Sihanouk when he rejected American economic and military aid in November 1963. On March 1, a national trading company known as SONEXIM replaced some 350 import-export companies and on July 1 the private banking system was nationalized, ending the operations of four local, 3 French, and 2 British banks. The reform reflected the Prince's belief that political independence is not possible without economic independence and that economic independence is not possible without a state-planned economy.'

¹⁶ Michael Leifer, "Cambodia: The Limits of Diplomacy"; Asian Survey, Vol. 7, No. 1, A Survey of Asia in 1966: Part I. (Jan., 1967), p.72

¹⁷ Milton Osborne, Politics and Power in Cambodia: The Sihanouk Years, Australia: Longman, 1973, p.89

U Nu aimed to improve Burma's security by ending the insurrections, by incorporating the various ethnic minorities within the Union, and by securing Burma's borders. He was unable to fully fulfil any of these goals. Despite his earlier successes against the rebellions, the core of the main insurrectionists remained largely intact, such that by 1957, it was estimated that three thousand communists under Than Tun, and two thousand Karens still operated effectively against the government.¹⁸ With regards to Nu's second goal, to unite the minority states; despite a decade of his best efforts, many of the ethnic leaders remained discontent with the domination of Burman representatives in Parliament and began, in 1958, to push for constitutional reform towards a federal principle that would allow for parity with Burma, and equal representation (in the House of Nationalities) from all constituent states within the Union.¹⁹ Many of the minority leaders could not accept what they perceived as the central government's efforts to "Burmanize" the people.²⁰ U Nu's third goal, to guarantee the security of Burma's borders also met with limited success; his efforts seemed to have stalled by 1958, with the long untamed border with China continuing to be porous to incursions by Communist Chinese troops, KMT troops and illegal immigrants.²¹ By the end of the 1950s, Nu's aim to consolidate a nation faced with ethnic and political divisions, had come to a standstill, and was no closer to reality than it had been at the peak of his power.

¹⁸ British Foreign Office, 1957, paras 3-4

¹⁹ U Nu, Saturday's Son, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Press, Bombay, 1976, p 340

²⁰ Josef Silverstein, "The Federal Dilemma in Burma", Far Eastern Survey, Vol. 28, No. 7. (Jul., 1959), p.97

²¹ Maung Maung, "The Burma-China Boundary Settlement", Asian Survey, Vol. 1, No. 1. (Mar,1961), p.43

Sihanouk too, was unable to fully stabilize and secure long-term guarantees for his country's security. Realizing that Cambodia would only be safe from the spill-over effects of the escalating war in Vietnam if its borders could be internationally guaranteed, Sihanouk's goal had been to obtain signed recognition from the major Cold War players for Cambodia's neutrality and sovereignty. Despite years of balancing and shifting favor among the superpowers, and his personal attempts at both international and bilateral forums, to guarantee Cambodia's borders in principle and law, these efforts had come to a standstill by the mid-1960s. During the 1950s, Sihanouk had first sought support from the West, but poor relations with Thailand and South Vietnam made the relationship untenable²² and eventually contributed to the break in Cambodian-US diplomatic relations in 1964. Believing that communism would eventually dominate the entire Indochina region,²³ Sihanouk then tried to woo the Chinese and even tolerated North Vietnamese border activities and incursions in return for a guarantee of Cambodia's borders.. Despite these mercurial shifts from one major power to another, Sihanouk, at the end of 1964, was still without any written recognition of Cambodia's frontier line.²⁴ 1965 continued to be a period of 'intense frustration in international affairs for Sihanouk'.²⁵ Faced with a combination of realities – being increasingly distanced from the US and her allies; regarding China as a friend, yet too far geographically to realistically bank on her support; no signs that the South Vietnamese or Thais would ever be other than irreconcilable antagonists, yet unable and unwilling to totally side with the Communists in Hanoi – Sihanouk's earlier energy and optimism in carving a secure niche

²² Osborne, p.170

²³ Jean-Pierre Simon, p.49

²⁴ British Foreign Office, 1964, paras 2 and 6

²⁵ Osborne, p.171

for Cambodia began to seep away even as he realised that his country was gradually being isolated.

Stuck in a Moment

Mired in challenges from various fronts, neither U Nu nor Sihanouk were able to build on the promise and potential of their earlier successes. In less than three years after supposedly reaching a political and personal milestone, U Nu found himself paralyzed by the bog of political infighting, economic and administrative inefficiency, and unresolved insurrections and cross-border tensions. Similarly, for Sihanouk, despite his 'triumphant' accession to the post of Chief of State in 1960, his control over the Cambodian state began to slip away between 1963 and 1966.²⁶ As the Vietnam War escalated during this period, Sihanouk's focus on foreign policy distracted him²⁷ from the signs of domestic unrest and widening cracks in the political structure he had built around himself.

More significantly, the period of slide from success for each man would pave the way for a further stage of disintegration. In U Nu's case, this stage was represented by the 1958 AFPFL split, and the period thereafter when the military caretaker government took over 'temporarily'. In the years leading up to 1958, the Army had become increasingly restless over the corruption and inefficiency of U Nu's government and the Prime Minister's handling of the insurgency problem;²⁸ the 'temporary' military solution to the disorganized civilian government eventually led to a full military coup in 1962. In

²⁶ Ibid. p.156

²⁷ Osborne, Politics, p.91

²⁸ British Foreign Office, 1958, para.4

Sihanouk's case, the 1966 elections – in which he decided not to adopt his usual practice of designating the *Sangkum* candidates – marked a turning point in Sihanouk's fortunes. Although employed as a strategy to ensure the conservative elements in Cambodian political circles would supplant leftist opponents within the government, it was these conservative forces within the National Assembly who eventually resented Sihanouk's rule and plotted his downfall. From 1966 onwards, observers also suggested that Sihanouk began to stop caring about day-to-day Cambodian politics; and as his grip loosened, potential opponents became alert.²⁹

Retreat and Refuge

Interestingly, when faced with difficulties, both U Nu and Sihanouk sought means of refuge and 'escape' for which they were criticized. For instance, in conjunction with his country's mounting problems, and especially after 1965, Sihanouk revived a hobby from his youth and became increasingly involved in film-making,³⁰ 'to the point where many in Phnom Penh saw his preoccupation as obsessional.'³¹ U Nu too, sought refuge, but in religion, rather than recreation. Already renowned for his religious beliefs and meditative retreats at times of national or personal crisis, Nu again planned to spend one week in a monastery in June 1958 after he had barely survived a vote of no confidence in Parliament, but had to give this up when advised this would prevent him from standing

²⁹ Chandler, p.150

³⁰ 'Between 1965 and 1969 the prince wrote, cast, produced, and directed nine films. Because he had no formal cinematographic training, monopolized the stage, permitted no criticism, and listened to little advice, the films turned out to be amateurish and self-indulgent.' (Chandler, p.152)

³¹ Osborne, p.178

for election.³² For this repeated tendency to retreat from political life in favor of meditation and spiritual self-renewal, Nu was criticized, not only for a lack of prioritization,³³ but also for alleged attempts to use religion and his pious image to garner votes. Against a backdrop of stagnating circumstances, neither U Nu nor Sihanouk aided their respective causes by indulging in alternative pursuits rather than dealing with the problem at hand. While Nu sincerely believed in the need for spiritual renewal when driven to a state of helplessness, Sihanouk sought to escape his problems through activities that catered to his pleasure and pride. The periods of stagnation hence revealed specific aspects of each leader's personality and temperament.

Against this background of a slide from success, both U Nu and Sihanouk sought to incorporate certain ideologies and ideals within their nation-building processes. The similarities were striking; both adopted Neutralism as a foreign policy, and translated their religious beliefs into a form of Buddhist Socialism as a national rallying call. Both leaders hoped that this dual strategy would lead to economic and social progress for their respective nations. Due to different circumstances and challenges, however, their interpretations and intentions varied.

³² "New Times of Burma June 1958", quoted in Donald Smith, Religion and Politics in Burma, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965, p.142

³³ Donald Smith, p.185

Chapter 4: Buddhist Socialism

Both U Nu and Sihanouk tried to incorporate Buddhism into their political ideologies and policies, but in practice, while their ideas were often similar in form, they were different in substance. Writing in 1965 to describe his brand of Buddhist Socialism, Sihanouk stated that “Our socialism, as our politics, go hand in hand with our national realities.” Though penned by the Cambodian leader, these words might just as well have come from U Nu, since both he and Sihanouk shaped their political ideas along national realities. One common national reality the two leaders shared was the thriving Theravada tradition in both Burma and Cambodia. In trying to build on the success of their consolidated positions, it was to this reality that the two men turned; as they tried to provide focus and meaning to nation-building efforts by marrying the traditional reality of Buddhism to the political modernity of Socialism.

However, even though both men based their Socialism on this common religious reality, the influence of other national realities in Burma and Cambodia also brought variations to the way each man incorporated Buddhism into political practice. The Buddhist principles they espoused and emphasized were almost always reflective of specific political concerns. This was aptly summed up by Jerrold Schecter, who wrote that the ‘reality of Buddhism is to be found not simply in the written word and practice, but primarily in the men who have taken the doctrine, often usurped it and wielded it to their own ways.’¹

¹ Jerrold Schecter, The New Face of Buddha: Buddhism and Political Power in Southeast Asia, (London:1967), p.xv

This chapter will address whether Buddhist Socialism, in practice, was able to provide either Burma or Cambodia with a concrete, sustainable development roadmap. Or did the process of having to amalgamate philosophical and religious ideas into an otherwise secular concept result in the ideologies becoming political slogans that were more rhetoric than practical? To attempt an answer, we first need to examine the impetus for each man's embracement of Socialism as a personal and political ideology.

4.1 Relative Realities

U Nu and Socialism

Buddhist Socialism was, to U Nu, a logical pairing of his religious and political beliefs. U Nu, a devout Buddhist since he was eighteen, truly wanted to set an example of spirituality for his people through his life and in his government policies. At the same time, having embraced Socialist principles since the 1930s, U Nu's aim in the 1950s was to develop a self-sustaining welfare state supported by a strong partnership between the state and the workers, which would 'nationalize all monopolizing capitalist undertakings'. To that end, U Nu interpreted and projected Socialism through the lens of Buddhist ideals, because it made sense to him personally, but also because it was a useful spiritual compass to guide the nation's economic and social development. For instance, when U Nu began to further elaborate his vision on Buddhist Socialism around the early 1950s, it was at a time when Burma was beginning to recover from the most tumultuous stages of the civil war that had seen almost the entire country overrun by various factions of Communists, mutineers, Karens and other separatists. With an urgent

need for structural restoration and national cohesiveness, U Nu, as ‘promoter of the faith’, used Buddhist concepts to motivate groups toward a common goal of a Socialist welfare state. The aim of socialism, according to U Nu, was based on the Theravadic principle of insight meditation and defined as a return to ‘an original pure state, prior to the appearance of the defilement of craving and the corruption of man, where there are no differences in gender, beauty or possessions’² This moral principle was used to guide and justify socialist economic policies. For example, U Nu supported land nationalization by arguing that by eliminating private ownership of land, the class struggle based on the illusion about the importance of property could be eliminated as well. U Nu also pressed for more redistribution of income on the grounds that this would increase the number of those economically capable of performing works of piety.³

Sihanouk’s Socialism

Sihanouk, while perhaps not as pious as U Nu, also came to recognize the political value of merging his Buddhist tradition with Socialist ideals. To distance himself and his country from Communism, yet without totally isolating Cambodia from the left, Sihanouk had, since the late 1950s, declared what he called at first "Khmer socialism" and later "Buddhist socialism". Economically, the system involved state intervention in many areas of life, while agriculture and commerce remained in private

² U Nu, Conduct of Government (1960), cited in Houtman, Gustaaf. Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa Monograph Series No. 33. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999

³Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, "Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Socialism," in Bardwell L. Smith, ed. Religion and the Legitimization of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma. Chambersburg, Pa.: ANIMA Books, 1978

hands.⁴ Politically, the purpose of this "socialism", Sihanouk explained, was "to prevent the triumph of Communism in Cambodia".⁵ Like U Nu, Sihanouk made reference to Socialism as a moral code, but for Sihanouk, it was less an attempt to preach ethical behavior, than it was a way to demonstrate to outsiders that Cambodia could embrace Socialist ideals (to placate his critics on the left), but without Marxist influences. In an interview with a foreign magazine, Sihanouk explained that the ideology of Cambodia's government was "Buddhist Socialism"; he then stated that "by socialism, I mean we must have a social conscience and try to give an opportunity to everyone to better himself according to his ability. And our regime has a religious connotation too: freedom brotherhood, love of peace, a sense of responsibility toward the poor. Communists say there cannot be socialism without Marxism. Nonsense!"⁶ Sihanouk added that "Our Socialism differs from Marxian socialism or communism...it is essentially Kampuchean inspired directly by our religious principle extolling the ideas of mutual help and social action with an accent on the welfare and blossoming of the individual."⁷ The essence of his doctrine, Sihanouk claimed, was to preserve "the barrier which preserves the originality of our race, of our traditions, of our religious faith, and which safeguards our independence vis-à-vis certain of our neighbours". In a 1960 statement made to the United Nations to explain why Cambodia should be free from external influences, Sihanouk stressed the value of Buddhist Socialism as a means to preserve Cambodia's

⁴ David Chandler, The Tragedy of Cambodian History (Yale University Press, 1991) p. 87.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Interview by William Attwood, "Responses of Norodom Sihanouk" in LOOK Magazine, 2 April 1968

⁷ Politique Economique du Sangkum Reastre Niyum, (Phnompenh), pp.1-2

traditions and conception of existence.⁸ Buddhist Socialism was thus a means to distinguish Cambodia from Cold War ideologies, and to emphasize that it should be allowed to follow its own path.

In practice however, Buddhist Socialism not only served to further cast Sihanouk's image within the heralded mold of a traditional Khmer Buddhist ruler, but also became a means to justify his policies. Although Sihanouk had embarked on a program of Khmer socialism in March 1956, he only began to seriously incorporate Buddhist ideals into his political thought and rhetoric during the mid-1960s due to political necessity. In 1963, Sihanouk had rejected United States aid and nationalised Cambodia's banks and import-export trade in the name of 'socialism'. By 1965, when faced with rising opposition over the economic stagnation resulting from his socialistic nationalization measures; and intensifying criticism of his foreign policy neutrality that resulted in the end of US-Cambodian diplomatic ties at a time of increasing Vietnamese threat, Sihanouk was hard-pressed for some form of justification for his decisions. He found it through an amalgamation of socialist and Buddhist principles; his 1965 article, "Our Buddhist Socialism" defended his various domestic and foreign policy decisions on the basis of religious principles.⁹

⁸ Statement by Sihanouk to the 15th Session of the General Assembly of the UN, Sep 29, 1960, p.12

⁹ Norodom Sihanouk, *Our Buddhist Socialism*, Kambuja No. 8, pp. 13-20, 1965

4.2 Buddhist Socialism: Comparing U Nu and Sihanouk

Although both U Nu and Sihanouk incorporated Buddhist themes into their political ideologies, the specific form in which they did so was relative to and adapted to, the respective national realities they faced. Such incorporation of religious elements was also influenced by individual outlook and personality. As a result, Buddhism was incorporated for different objectives – as a personal duty and means of mass motivation for U Nu, and as a means of political justification and of cultural distinction for Sihanouk. Unlike U Nu’s vision of a Buddhist welfare state designed along Socialist principles, Sihanouk seemed more focused on using Buddhism to defend his decisions rather than articulate a blueprint for his country’s future.

This variance in realities and response is demonstrated in three inter-linked broad Buddhist “themes” incorporated by the two men that not only functioned to explain Socialism in terms of Buddhist precepts, but also reflected the national needs that such syncretic Socialism hoped to address. They are, in order, the Alleviation of Suffering, the concept of the Middle Way, and the idea of Theravada “Individualism”.

Alleviation of Suffering

Central to the broad spectrum of definitions for Western Socialism is the expectation to produce an egalitarian society where all are cared for and there is no need for poverty. The utopian similarity of such an ideal society to Buddhism’s ultimate goal of alleviating suffering, was not lost on either U Nu or Sihanouk. In explaining the reasons and means to attain the welfare state in Burma, U Nu promised hope of collective

prosperity – likened to the legendary *Padaythabin* (Tree of Fulfillment) – and freedom from class conflict – equivalent to the abolishment of the three evils of greed, hatred and ignorance – by placing Socialist terms within Buddhist contexts and imagery. For example, in trying to implement the *Land Nationalization Act of 1948*, Nu defended land nationalization as not being equivalent to theft, but as the opportunity for landlords to make merit by means of charitable gift-giving. He stated, ‘Property is meant not to be saved, not for gains, nor for comfort. It is to be used by men to meet their needs in respect of clothing, food, habitation in their journey towards Nirvana or Heaven.’¹⁰

In a similar way, Sihanouk utilized Buddhist teachings to emphasize the importance of an ‘enlightened struggle against all forms of suffering and for the well-being of others’ to justify Cambodia’s adoption of socialist principles. For both leaders, Buddhism was a rallying call of sorts. However, the difference lay in that while U Nu was trying to mobilize popular support among largely disjointed and disillusioned militant (PVO) and peasant (ABPO) groupings for his Socialist goals by rallying them around a common vision cast in traditional terms, Sihanouk’s goal leaned more towards mobilizing a society to perpetuate the status quo of Cambodia’s social relations by highlighting the social harmony and prosperity that would prevail if the consensus between ruler and ruled was left unmolested. Again, Sihanouk conceived Buddhist Socialism as an ideology that would preserve Khmer societal culture and traditions – and hence, hierarchy. By 1965, Sihanouk was using the same line of argument to reassure critics that his sponsored institutions, and his socialistic nationalization programs already implemented were ultimately for the good of the people because they were done

¹⁰ Land Nationalization Act, 1948, Trager (1966:151–52).

according to Buddhist teachings and Khmer tradition: ‘Our Sangkum, in “reawakening” out people and enlisting them in an intense and continuous crusade of national constructions, has merely reverted to the source of Buddhism and to the traditions established several centuries earlier by our Great Kings.’¹¹

Although both men linked Buddhist ethics to Socialist welfarism and idealism, U Nu was a far more committed Buddhist, and had a clearer aim and belief from the outset on establishing a welfare state that would alleviate suffering on earth; Sihanouk was relatively more vague in explaining Socialism as a blueprint ideological base, choosing more often to wax rhetoric about its benefits, and to say what it was not (it was not Marxian communism or socialism, but Khmer), rather than articulate his plans as clearly as U Nu did. To be fair, however, Nu’s specific hopes, though well-articulated, dealt primarily with lofty moral issues related to Marxist concepts of society, rather than with practical economic strategies; he claimed that ‘Pyidawtha would only come into being if the causes of class conflicts, class exploitations, crimes, diseases, ignoramuses and all retrogressive steps and the evil system of exploitation of small countries by the strong are eliminated.’¹² To U Nu, wrongful values and misplaced emphases on ‘transitory pleasures’ were hindrances to the promised bliss of Socialism in Burma; Buddhism was thus the solution.

Comparatively, Sihanouk’s focus remained less on the moralistic, and more on the “practical”. In claiming that U Nu’s Buddhist Socialism for Burma ‘was not

¹¹ Sihanouk, “Our Buddhist Socialism”, in Kambuja Review, November 15, 1965, pp.37-38

¹² Burma’s Goal, 1953

altogether similar to the Buddhist socialism of Cambodia', Sihanouk stressed that 'our socialism proclaims itself pragmatic'. Being "pragmatic", however, often meant simply attaching Buddhist terminology to existing policies, or proclaiming that government actions were guided by Buddhist concepts, rather than actual attempts to preach the personal and societal application of Buddhist ideals. This was most evident in Sihanouk's interpretation of the Middle Way concept

The Middle Way

By downplaying the Buddha's core teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path that constituted the *doctrinal* Middle Way between pleasure and pain to achieve enlightenment, Sihanouk took the term in its literal sense and translated it into a declaration for ideological impartiality, and a religious justification for political neutrality. He claimed, 'I attempt in all ways to apply the great Buddhist principle: the road of the middle. Domestically, to be halfway between Capitalism and Marxism. In foreign policy, to establish and respect a scrupulous neutrality. This is not a choice; there is no alternative. It is simply a matter of existing.'¹³

In terms of foreign policy, such neutrality was, in Sihanouk's eyes, vital to Cambodia's survival. Despite facing external pressure to resume ties with the United States in 1965, the rising tensions between the neighboring communist state and the US ensured Sihanouk would not risk a partnership that might drag his country into war. As such, he turned to Buddhism to deflect criticisms of selfishness and cowardice by showing that his decision to remain neutral was simply obedience to religious instruction

¹³ quoted in Simonne Lacouture, Cambodge, Lausanne, Rencontre, 1963.

to escape suffering via the “Middle Way”. U Nu, in comparison, while not strictly interpreting this concept as Sihanouk did, did also incorporate Buddhist values into his choice of foreign policy. For instance, Buddhism emphasizes personal responsibility rather than reliance on others; it also considers all human situations impermanent; neutrality thus became a ‘natural’ choice for U Nu as a flexible policy that allowed Burma to make impartial and independent decisions that could adapt to changing circumstances, without necessarily following or offending others.¹⁴ With reference to the Middle Way concept, however, U Nu took it to emphasize the ‘spirit of compromise and mutual adjustment of opposing beliefs and interests’ that was ‘clearly central to the functioning of democracy.’ Since democracy as both principle and practice was highly regarded by U Nu as the road to a welfare state, the use of religion to lend credence to it made sound strategy in garnering support for his push towards democratic socialism. Such selective interpretation of Buddhist doctrine between Sihanouk and U Nu was again reflective of the separate national realities they faced.

Interestingly, despite these differences in interpretation, it was also within the Middle Way concept that Sihanouk and U Nu found common ground. Both took the Middle Way teaching to justify their positions in Socialism, located halfway between the political spectrum extremities of Capitalism and Marxism. Both leaders had reason to relate each extremity to evil: Capitalism was linked to the imperialistic colonial powers whose yoke had only just been broken; and Marxism was linked to the Communists who continued to pose an increasing threat to both men. In implementing his brand of Socialism, Sihanouk had claimed to take what was best in communism, and nothing from

¹⁴ Liang Chi-shad, Burma’s Foreign Relations: Neutralism in Theory and Practice, p.64

Karl Marx, so as “to prevent the triumph of communism in Cambodia.”¹⁵ By 1965, Sihanouk was relatively passive in describing Communism as ‘simply a different religion’ that Cambodia could ‘coexist with’, a tone reminiscent of his Middle Way neutrality and reflective of his unwillingness to provoke his Communist neighbours and so risk losing the heavy amounts of financial and military aid he was receiving from Socialist bloc countries like China and the Soviet Union. By incorporating Buddhist doctrine into his political ideology, Sihanouk was also able to justify the domestic exclusion of Marxism by claiming its incompatibility with Buddhist teachings. This form of ideological defense was exercised more aggressively by U Nu, who justified his decision to ban the Communist Party in 1953 on the religious grounds that Marxian Materialism was at odds with the Buddhist belief in Impermanence.

Although both men incorporated Buddhist teachings to support their ideological views, the differing motivations and extent to which they did this were indicative of domestic situations that either inspired or inhibited them. For instance, the permeation and translation of Buddhist beliefs into political action in Burma was fueled by the Buddhist revival that was taking place around this time as U Nu consolidated his government’s domestic position. In a similar context of choices inspired by circumstance, Sihanouk also turned to the middle path as a political tool at a time in the mid-1960s when he feared the rising popularity of leftists like Hou Youn, Hu Nim and Khieu Samphan.¹⁶ Not content with applying pressure on such individuals, Sihanouk employed Buddhism to attack the ideology they subscribed to. By the end of 1966, wary

¹⁵ Chandler, p.87

¹⁶ Ibid, p.153

that increasing tensions between political factions on the left and right would lead to his isolation, Sihanouk used Buddhism's middle path teachings to appeal to the people over the heads of their elected representatives, informing them that they were neither right nor left but like him, 'socialists following the Buddha'.¹⁷

“Individualism” vs “Mobilization”

This trend of using Buddhist-styled Socialism to garner widespread activism, or at least, public approval, was one of the primary aims of both U Nu and Sihanouk. Both men were able to do this, despite the clear emphasis in Theravada Buddhism on the *individual's* efforts and journey toward enlightenment that was not only independent of others, but was in fact considered a necessary part of divorcing oneself from the concerns and hindrances of the material world. U Nu, for instance, managed to reconcile these individualistic tendencies of self-acquired Theravadic salvation, with the mass mobilization and communal co-dependence needed for Socialism. He did this by arguing that Socialism would remove the forces of Capitalism that encouraged people to ignore the Buddhist truth of material impermanence. Therefore, by working together toward a Socialist welfare state free from Capitalistic hindrances, people were, in effect striving toward a religious goal where men would have more time and opportunity to work at attaining *nibbana*. In other words, the communal effort that came first would be directly beneficial for the individual later. By incorporating this religious reasoning into his ideology, U Nu's efforts in 1953 to mobilize the peasant-based ABPO to “form the vanguard” in Burma's march toward a welfare state was thus given a vital spiritual inspiration.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.161

Sihanouk, too, embarked on a similar form of mass mobilization. Apart from his efforts to label and mobilize the general populace as “socialists following the Buddha”, he also continued to seek domestic approval for his policies through religion. For instance, he sought to develop a new activist aspect to Buddhism in Cambodia where the *sangha* was encouraged to break with individual isolation and instead participate in nation-building programs such as education projects which were credited to Buddhist teachings. Sihanouk described the Buddhist clergy as ‘very cooperative and dynamic. Without attempting to interfere in the exercise of power, they assist me by using their great influence on the people to mobilize them for public work projects.’¹⁸ Such support by the *sangha* in turn translated into a tacit religious endorsement of Sihanouk’s policies that the layman could relate to.

For both U Nu and Sihanouk, the resulting socio-political syncretisms that emerged in Burma and Cambodia respectively, each bearing the name “Buddhist Socialism” were neither completely alike, nor poles apart. Each man’s choice, interpretation and application of traditional beliefs to a Western-originated ideology were shaped by relative national realities in each country. As efforts that embodied both religious tradition and political modernity, however, they bore common testimony to a strand of historical continuity in which Southeast Asian rulers not only derived authority from religion, but also incorporated new concepts to suit their political needs.

¹⁸ Statement by Samdech Head of State to the London Times and the New Delhi Statesman, Kambuja, Feb 1969, p.22

4.3 Assessment of Buddhist Socialism

From such a perspective, it is plausible that Buddhist Socialism was more effective as symbolic rhetoric and imagery than it was as practical policy. It was useful as a cultural reference for all that U Nu and Sihanouk tried to accomplish; whether it was to motivate and rally the people, to justify and explain decisions, or simply to give their economic policies a moral and religious distinction to differentiate them from the ills of Western capitalism and Marxist Communism.

Buddhist Socialism could not however, provide a sustainable economic development plan for either U Nu or Sihanouk. The “brand” of “Socialism” was an attractive political ideological counter and alternative to Capitalism and Communism. The merging Socialist principles with Buddhist ideology however, arguably diluted the clarity and conviction of U Nu and Sihanouk’s economic policies.

In U Nu’s case, the belief that virtue, piety and ethical principles could somehow lead to an egalitarian economic outcome was no substitute for sound economic planning and process. Buddhist Socialism was more useful for launching the *Pyidawtha* campaign than it was for ensuring the initial ambitious 8-year plan –that was subsequently discarded and revised in both 1955 and 1957 –would work; especially since fundamental issues like law and order and a lack of coordination between government departments remained unresolved.¹⁹ In U Nu’s case, particularly, Buddhist Socialism could not provide the political direction and doctrine that Burma needed.

¹⁹ The Nation, Jun 9, 1957

What began initially as an optimistic, “modern” melding of economic method and religious philosophy became, by the end of the 1950s, a crude rejection of Marxism as party doctrine on one hand, and a reversion to the moralistic fundamentals of Buddhism on the other. In 1954, the official philosophy of the *Pyidawtha* Government was stated thus: ‘The new Burma sees no conflict between religious values and economic progress. Spiritual health and material well-being are not enemies: they are natural allies.’²⁰ By 1958, the seeming implausibility of trying to incorporate economic changes within specific Burmese cultural traditions had become painfully apparent. In a speech that year, Nu rejected the incompatibility of Marxian materialism with Buddhist values, ‘the more scientific knowledge advances, the more support there is for the Buddhist belief that in nature there is no such thing as Matter, but only inherent properties...the AFPFL does not believe that Marxism is a doctrine that is infallible and is true without reservations’ and therefore ‘rejects Marxism as a guiding political philosophy or as the ideology of the AFPFL.’²¹ Having broken completely with Marxist doctrine did not mean that U Nu had something else to replace it. Rather, this marked a move towards politics based on morality and tradition that culminated in Nu’s decision in the 1960 elections to campaign on moral grounds to establish Democracy and make Buddhism the state religion. The potential and practical goals of Buddhist Socialism had not been fulfilled; rather, the phrase could hardly be mentioned without recalling Nu’s failure to deliver on a theme that was so symbolically useful initially.

²⁰ Pyidawtha, The New Burma, London:Hazel Watson and Viney, Ltd, 1954, p.10

²¹ “U Nu, ‘Political Ideology of the AFPFL’” ‘Burma Weekly Bulletin, vol.6, no.43, February 6, 1958, p.375-376)

To Sihanouk, Buddhist Socialism was, in many ways, a fashionable slogan that masked his nationalistic, autocratic and, at times, idiosyncratic economic decisions. Socialism was useful as a broad slogan for promising increased national production, to justify state intervention and nationalization of the economy and to rally his countrymen towards self-reliance. Sihanouk also stirred the nation's imagination by conjuring up images of a golden age in Cambodia's Angkorean past where harmony existed between ruler and ruled, which his policy of Socialism was attempting to revive.²² In this, he mirrored the tactic of historical symbolism that U Nu had used in promoting Socialism as a means of returning to Burma's past glory of "*Pyidawtha*". In practice however, Sihanouk never explained in detail how Buddhist Socialism could be applied or translated into tangible economic progress. In fact, as pointed out by Roger Kershaw, the philosophical inconsistencies in Sihanouk's Socialism were blatant, and Sihanouk himself was aware that despite his efforts, real socialism and the monarchism he represented could never mix.²³ Without clarity of method or objective, Sihanouk's application of "Socialism" to the economy resulted only in myopic reactionary measures instead of a clearly defined blueprint.

JLS Girling aptly summed up Sihanouk's failure, and posed the more important question on the usefulness of Buddhist Socialism – 'in contrast to the promise of his early years, the last stages of Sihanouk's rule (especially from 1967) were marked by corruption, agrarian neglect, economic stagnation, educated unemployment, over-centralisation, police repression, and finally the institutional and foreign crisis of 1969-

²² Chandler, p.88

²³ Roger Kershaw, Monarchy in South-East Asia: The Faces of Tradition in Transition, , Routledge, 2001, p.57

70. The degeneracy of Sihanouk's regime raises the gloomy question whether the type of "Buddhist socialism" in Cambodia...can possibly present a genuine alternative to dictatorial communism on the one hand and to capitalist exploitation or Rightwing authoritarianism on the other.'²⁴

"Buddhist Socialism" had been adopted in Burma and Cambodia with precisely the intent to offer an alternative between communism and capitalist exploitation. As the ideology was modified and adapted, it became specific to, and reflective of, its architect. Sihanouk himself, recounted this process while in exile in 1972 -

"In the Third World, at the moment when history took cognizance of it, around the mid-1950s, at the time of the Bandung Conference, socialism was, one may say, in fashion – if only because it was opposed to capitalism which one tended to identify more or less with colonialism from which we had just freed ourselves with so much suffering...So we all began to talk of socialism, Sukarno...U Nu, myself, we felt in our rather confused way that here was an instrument of national development and a weapon against colonialism and imperialism...Each one of us had 'his' socialism, which we related to a powerful current of history – more, or less, correctly comprehended or emulated."²⁵

With the benefit of hindsight, and through a comparative lens, Sihanouk's words are correct insofar as U Nu and Sihanouk each came up with "his" own form of Socialism.

²⁴ JLS Girling, ISEAS Occasional Paper No.7: Cambodia and the Sihanouk Myths, June 1971, p.10

²⁵ Cited in Kershaw, p.58

In application however, neither man was able to effectively translate his philosophy into a viable policy.

Chapter 5: Neutralism and Neutrality

Another example of how both men took on modern concepts to suit their needs was in the way they adapted the themes of the non-aligned movement of the 1950s, to defend their respective country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. U Nu sought a foreign policy that would cultivate goodwill with other countries while keeping Burma free to navigate its own path, independent of the demands and dangers of Cold War affiliations. Sihanouk needed a way to keep Cambodia safe from the Indochina conflict, and he believed the best way was to play off one party against another, while seeking the attention and agreement of the Great Powers to guarantee his country's borders. Although both men approached foreign policy decisions with a broad attitude of non-alignment more accurately described as 'Neutralism' – which was a state of non-involvement during peacetime –, both preferred to speak of and demand the rights of 'Neutrality' – a term more technically used to describe a country's legal status and rights in times of war.

This chapter will trace the reasons for U Nu and Sihanouk's choice of foreign policy and assess whether it was a feasible decision for their countries. It will also assess the viability of the policy in practice by comparing the way each man interpreted and implemented neutralism. By viewing neutralism through the comparative lens of U Nu and Sihanouk's careers it becomes apparent that the policy was inherently adaptable to geo-political variations; but did these adaptations prove effective in ensuring security, or did they create further instability?

5.1 Overview

Burma's Foreign Policy

U Nu's foreign policy choice resulted from an acute awareness of his country's vulnerability; in addition to being sandwiched by India and China, Burma was situated between contending Cold War spheres, represented by Communist China, and pro-Western Thailand. Nu lamented in 1950 that Burma was: "like a tender gourd among the cactus. We cannot move an inch. If we act irresponsibly...and thrust the Union of Burma into the arms of one bloc, the other bloc will not be contented to look on with folded arms."¹ Against this backdrop, U Nu outlined a foreign policy of Neutrality centered on non-alignment and independent action; Burma's intention was to "play our role in world affairs to the fullest extent of our ability. We are like the proverbial prawn, which despite its tiny proportions, could yet swim in the ocean. But we abhor the very idea of acting as a disciple to any big power or as a satellite of any political bloc. We do not like to lift our fingers or nod our heads at a signal from anyone. For these reasons we have steered clear of membership in any bloc and have openly declared our policy of strict Neutrality."²

Although this path of "strict Neutrality" led U Nu to participate actively in the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s, his aim for Burma to play an independent role in world affairs also meant advocating peaceful co-existence, and trying to mediate Cold War rivalries – such as the antagonistic US-China relationship – that might threaten Burma's security. In engaging its larger neighbours, Neutrality was a key component as

¹ U Nu's 1950 speech, cited in Thomson, p.266

² U Nu, "Towards a Welfare State." speech at the first Union Welfare Conference, official English trans. Printed by the Government of the Union of Burma, Ministry of Information (Rangoon, 1952, pp 28-31)

well; India, for example, served as a model for democracy, neutralism and non-alignment³ and was a key reason for cordial Indo-Burmese relations. Relations with China, however, were more tricky due to an un-demarcated border, illegal immigration, and the presence of Nationalist Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) troops on Burmese soil seeking sanctuary from the ruling Chinese Communists. In dealing with these issues, Burma sought to use its 'positive neutrality' to prevent China's interference in Burma's internal affairs – first obtaining a UN resolution in 1953 for KMT troops to leave Burma, then signing, with the Chinese, an agreement of “Peaceful Co-existence” in 1954. (Subsequently the caretaker government under Ne Win even managed to secure a border agreement and treaty of friendship and non-aggression with China in 1960.)

Cambodia's Foreign Policy

Sihanouk's foreign policy of non-aligned and independent action also emerged in the mid 1950s as a means to preserve his country's security. Faced with the impending regional threat of Communism after the Viet Minh's victory over France at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Sihanouk had initially considered joining the American dominated Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), but subsequently grew uneasy about entering a partnership that included traditional rivals, Thailand and South Vietnam, and was eventually swayed by U Nu and India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru towards a strategy of non-alignment. Sihanouk distinguished Cambodia from all commitments and blocs, even the 'neutralist ones', when he stated that “In our foreign relations we have favored neutrality, which in the United States is all too often confused with 'neutralism', although it is fundamentally different. We are neutral in the same way Switzerland and

³ U Nu, Saturday's Son, New Haven: Connecticut, London: Yale University Press, 1975, p.231

Sweden are neutral –not neutralist like Egypt or Indonesia...our votes in the United Nations...are not often ‘aligned’ with those of the bloc of ‘neutralist’ nations.”⁴

By the 1960s, Sihanouk was convinced that non-alignment and the ability to act independently in foreign policy were crucial for Cambodia. Where U Nu likened Burma to being surrounded by cactus, Sihanouk described a Cambodia surrounded by expanding conflicts in Laos and South Vietnam during the early 1960s “like a stack of hay placed between two other stacks already set on fire”.⁵ To escape being “burnt”, Sihanouk’s brand of neutralism in the 1960s involved trying, but ultimately failing, to obtain international guarantees for Cambodia’s borders and legal rights as a neutral state. Sihanouk also sought to negotiate and manipulate the currents of Great Power relations; first choosing to break relations with the US in 1963 after being convinced of American involvement in Thai and South Vietnamese plots against him; then warming to the Communist bloc to the extent of tolerating North Vietnamese bases on Cambodian territory; before turning back to the US in 1969 as a last resort when Sihanouk realized belatedly that his mercurial and impulsive balancing act had isolated himself both domestically and abroad. Most critically, conservative elements within his government, concerned that Sihanouk’s brand of Neutralism had put Cambodia too much at risk of a Communist takeover, had cause to plot his downfall by the end of the decade.

⁴ Foreign Affairs, vol. xxxvi, no.4 (1958)p.582, cited in AW Stargardt: Problems of Neutrality in Southeast Asia: The Relevance of the European Experience ISEAS Occasional Paper No.12, May 1972, p.12

⁵ Cited in Cambodia: Problems of Neutrality and Independence, Interdoc, May 1970, p.6

Although both U Nu and Sihanouk claimed to adopt “Neutrality”, the essence of each man’s foreign policy was, in practice, an “adaptive” form of “Neutralism” based on non-alignment and the right to exercise independent sovereign action. Each man carved an independent path, constrained neither by the strict legal restrictions on state activity usually associated with permanently neutral states⁶, nor by the passive aloofness towards world affairs which some critics identified as traits of neutralism.⁷ Rather each actively sought to parade his ideals and agenda before a global audience.

Broad Comparisons

In comparing their foreign policies, three fundamental themes stand out – those of non-alignment, pro-activity and adaptation. With these three markers, it is possible to trace the reasons, interpretation and development of their policies. Given the somewhat ambiguous definitions of their ideas, the terms – ‘Neutralism’, ‘Neutrality’ and ‘Neutral’ shall be used interchangeably to refer to each man’s policies. As with their practice of Buddhist Socialism, U Nu and Sihanouk’s decisions in foreign policy were influenced by national and historical realities.

5.2 Non-Alignment

Non-alignment was a logical choice for U Nu, given Burma’s historical and geographical vulnerability. Historically, Burma’s political and military ties had scarred the country. British colonialism had brought economic and social discrimination, transferred resources to outsiders – Indian money-lenders – under the plural society, and

⁶ Samir N. Anabtawi, “Neutralists and Neutralism”, in The Journal of Politics, Vol.27, No.2 May, 1965, pp.351-352

⁷ Robert A Scalapino, “Neutralism in Asia”, p.49

wreaked irreparable damage on Burma's cultural institutions – such as the monarchy. Burma's ill experiences with outsiders continued during the Second War, when its ties with the British made it a Japanese target; the resulting oppression and destruction of the Japanese Occupation left Burma even more wary of affiliations. Geographically, U Nu had to contend with the 1500-mile Sino-Burmese border which was a historical source of potential aggression. Up till the 19th century, China still regarded Burma as a vassal state⁸ – the Chinese launched four unsuccessful expeditions against Burma between 1765-69 to rein in Burmese territorial ambitions in the Shan and Lao areas. To Nu, there was historical basis to avoid making allegiances that would either bring Burma closer into China's sphere of influence, or antagonize it. After all, China still claimed sovereignty over areas in the Kachin, Shan and Wa border states that the British had leased from China in 1897. .

The same combination of geographical and historical vulnerability also influenced Sihanouk's decision, whereby Cambodia's proximity to traditionally antagonistic neighbours –Thailand and Vietnam – had resulted in centuries of political and territorial erosion. Although French rule had provided a period of seeming stability, the end of the protective colonial era meant Cambodia had to cope independently with the reappearance of traditional antagonisms, albeit in modern guise.'⁹ When Thailand and South Vietnam chose to ally themselves with the Western bloc, Sihanouk did not follow suit for lack of trust of his neighbours' intentions; not wanting to pit himself directly

⁸ Bertil Lintner, "Burma and Its Neighbours", Paper presented at Conference in February 1992 at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, p.3

⁹ Michael Leifer, Cambodia: The Search for Security, London: Pall Mall Press,1967, p.186

against either the West or Communist blocs, however, Sihanouk decided in the mid 1950s that his country should follow both India and Burma's example of non-alignment.

Passive non-alignment was, however, insufficient for Sihanouk's needs. Although he, like U Nu, had participated in the Afro-Asian Bandung Conference of non-aligned nations in 1955, each man's experience with non-alignment arose under different circumstances, and led to different results. U Nu's practice of non-alignment had elevated Burma to prominence in Asian –and even global – politics by setting a standard of seeming impartiality and idealism in the midst of Cold War tensions. His professed objectives of world peace and attempts to mediate between superpower rivals stood both as a testimony to Burma's good intentions and as a reason for it to thus be left out of ideological and regional conflicts. These efforts culminated in the Bandung Conference where Nu arrived as one of the principal founders of the non-aligned movement. In comparison, Sihanouk's attempts to mirror the way Nu (and Nehru) had avoided conflict and coalitions through non-alignment, did not meet with equal success.

One explanation lay in the contrasting geopolitical situations they faced. As mentioned, U Nu likened Burma to a "tender gourd amongst the cactus", while Sihanouk compared Cambodia to a "stack of hays placed between two other stacks already set on fire". Although both analogies meant that neither could take sides without fear of reprisal, Cambodia faced a more urgent threat of encroaching violence from neighboring Laos and Vietnam. Cambodia was caught at the crux of a tug-of-war between superpower interests; although non-alignment proved useful in wooing China, which

valued Cambodia's neutral status as a buffer against American expansion on the peninsula; it was viewed with suspicion by the US who worried that Cambodia might succumb to Communist pressure if left on its own.¹⁰ In this sense, non-alignment itself was insufficient to ensure security, if the Cold War blocs and their proxies were not dissuaded from spreading their struggle to his country's borders.

In this sense, Sihanouk could not afford a passive or aloof foreign policy; neither could U Nu. Although Burma's foreign relations were relatively less complex than Cambodia's, U Nu did not sit simply wait and hope the Cold war would pass by. Rather, Nu took initiatives to mediate and preach against superpower rivalries that could destabilize regional security. While Nu was not entangled by such rivalries in the way Sihanouk was, both men took proactive steps to enhance their countries' long-term survival and success.

5.3 Pro-activity

Both U Nu and Sihanouk took proactive steps to engineer favorable geo-political conditions for their countries' security. U Nu often implied that neutralism should not dictate a passive role for his government in foreign relations.¹¹ Similarly, for Sihanouk, neutralism was not simply staying out of the affairs (and alignment) of others, but was a means of enabling a small nation to exert a disproportionate amount of influence by playing off one great power against another. Both men interpreted neutralism to mean

¹⁰ FRUS Vol. XXIII (1961-3) p.2 72, FRUS Vol. IV (1961-3), pp 695-6; Clymer, "The Perils of Neutrality", p.617

¹¹ William Crane Johnstone, Burma's Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1963) p.77

having the sovereign right to independent action, free from external interference. In this regard, they actively leveraged on their status of neutrality to gain advantages; initiated and cultivated relationships with other countries for specific aims; and even gained enough confidence to seek roles as neutral mediators in international relations.

Foreign Aid

During the early days of fragile independence, U Nu and Sihanouk respectively leveraged on their status of neutrality to extract favor and establish strategic relations with more powerful. To justify receiving aid from the United States and Britain in 1950, U Nu described it as ‘aid from friendly countries to help restore peace and development in Burma’; and ‘an act of cooperation that did not violate his country’s policy of non-alignment’.¹² Sihanouk also leveraged on his country’s neutral status to extract aid, beginning with a military aid agreement with the US in 1955 that secured funds and equipment for the Cambodian army; by the early 1960s, US aid constituted 30 percent of Cambodia's defence budget and 14 percent of total budget inflows. Observers in 1956 noted that ‘it is clear that Sihanouk, as is his right, has interpreted neutrality as a means of securing maximum economic benefits from the rival power blocs. Already in receipt of French and American aid (the latter running at \$50 million a year and making the Cambodian aid programme one of the two biggest on a per capita basis), Cambodia under Sihanouk set about acquiring comparable benefits from Communist sources.’¹³

¹² speech, March 2, 1950, quoted in Chi-shad Liang, Burma’s Foreign Relations: Neutralism in Theory and Practice. New York: Praeger, 1990, p.62

¹³ Brian Crozier, “The International Situation in Indochina” Pacific Affairs, Vol. 29, No. 4. (Dec, 1956) p.320

U Nu: Pacifist

U Nu and Sihanouk applied a similar proactive approach in terms of initiating and cultivating relations with other countries, albeit with different aims. U Nu, for instance, was guided by the desire to contribute proactively to international peace, in order to facilitate the secure conditions needed for national development. Burma would seek to do this through ‘an independent foreign policy, designed to maintain the friendship of all nations and to avoid big-power alliances.’¹⁴ U Nu explained that Burma’s non-aligned foreign policy had two additional goals – that of ‘friendship with all countries’ and ‘positive endeavors to bridge the gulf between opposing blocs and to promote peace.’¹⁵ To that end, the Burmese leader conducted a series of goodwill tours to foreign capitals – especially during 1954-1955. ‘At each stopover, he emphasized Burma’s friendship and support for the country he was visiting, and his conviction that international problems could be resolved without war.’¹⁶ U Nu sought to firm up such relations without being tied down, through treaties of Friendship that carried no commitment to joint action but merely guaranteed that the two nations would live in peace, promoting mutually advantageous programs. By 1957, Burma had concluded treaties with Indonesia, India, Pakistan and Thailand.¹⁷ U Nu’s non-aligned status gave him the flexibility to balance Burma’s relations with others by seemingly spreading friendly relations as far as possible.

¹⁴ JS Thomson, “Burmese Neutralism”, in *Political Science Quarterly* 72 (June 1957), p. 261

¹⁵ U Nu, “Martyrs’ Day Speech”, July 19, 1956 quoted in Johnstone, *Burma’s*, p.103

¹⁶ Thomson, *Burmese*, p.281

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.279

Sihanouk: Attention Seeker

In contrast, Sihanouk's activities were not primarily aimed at generating goodwill, but more at ensuring that Cambodia would receive sufficient international attention to guarantee its fragile borders, especially against – as perceived by Sihanouk – Vietnamese and Thai expansionism. Writing in 1965, Bernard Gordon described three essential elements of Cambodian foreign policy: its goal was survival, its principle, to maintain Cambodia's value to states which had potential to control its destiny, and its method was to keep Cambodia constantly in the forefront of thought of leaders directly concerned with Southeast Asia.¹⁸ To achieve the third aspect, one strategy was to keep countries guessing where Cambodia's loyalties lay; unlike U Nu's brand of neutralism that offered friendship to all, Sihanouk often cautioned that good relationships with Cambodia were not to be taken for granted, but could be affected by attempts to interfere in Cambodia's internal affairs.¹⁹ To bolster Cambodia's security, Sihanouk campaigned enthusiastically during the 1960s – as the Vietnam conflict escalated –for an international conference to guarantee Cambodia's borders and status of neutrality, equivalent to that which had been accorded to Laos in the 1954 Geneva conference.²⁰ Failing to do so by the mid 1960s, he resorted to seeking statements from any and all countries to at least formally recognize Cambodia's frontiers, eventually obtaining recognition from 52 countries.²¹ Like U Nu, Sihanouk – though having more specific agenda and demands –undertook a personal mission to proactively woo the attention, favor and friendship of other countries.

¹⁸ Bernard K Gordon, "Cambodia: Where Foreign Policy Counts", *Asian Survey*, p.442

¹⁹ Bernard K Gordon, "Cambodia: Shadow over Angkor" in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 9, No. 1, A Survey of Asia in 1968: Part I. (Jan., 1969), p.59

²⁰ Nigel Lindsay, *Sihanouk and the Practice of Cambodian Neutrality, 1954-1979*, Thesis (M.Litt), University of Aberdeen, p.8

²¹ *Ibid.* p.215

Through such posturing and projection of their personalities on the global stage, U Nu and Sihanouk garnered more attention than their relatively small nations would otherwise have received. Both became respectively renowned for their pro-active steps to promote specific causes, whether it was for world peace, or for territorial guarantees.

Mediators

This increase in international stature, coupled with domestic stability, emboldened U Nu and Sihanouk to seek the roles of neutral mediators. Burma's relative stability by 1954 allowed Nu to travel to the capitals for East and West, where he boldly and politely commended one to the other to reconcile the cold war blocs.²² During his visit to the US in June 1955, Nu assured the Americans that "the present government of China truly wants peace"²³ and that 'Burma was fully prepared to mediate between the two countries, if they should so desire.'²⁴ This was in line with his prior promise to Chinese Premier Chou En-lai in Peking six months earlier that he would exert his utmost 'to bring about an understanding between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America.'²⁵ U Nu's boldness was driven by his idealism and perception of Burma's role; he stated, "We are a small nation and the big powers may not take much notice of us but it is our duty to speak out and we will not shun that duty."²⁶

²² Thomson, p.281

²³ U Nu, speech to the Overseas Press Club, text in "An Asian Speaks", (p.23) Washington, July 6, 1955;

²⁴ Johnstone, p.172

²⁵ Burma Weekly Bulletin, vol. 3, No.37, December 15, 1954, pp.284-288; cited in Thomson, p.281

²⁶ "Letter from Burma", The Nation, October 30, 1954

Sihanouk's domestic success also gave him the clout to express himself on a wider stage. His self-appointment as Chief-of State in 1960 emboldened him to embark on pro-active ventures in foreign policy; and 'like other neutrals, Sihanouk was never so happy as when he was able to play the mediator.'²⁷ Sihanouk's principal accomplishments included helping to convene the International Conference on Laos in Geneva in May 1961, and attempting to mediate the Sino-Indian dispute of 1962. It was clear that both men's mediation efforts were to ensure their countries' security. U Nu's easing of international Cold War tensions would reduce the risk of spillover conflicts into Burma; and Sihanouk hoped to make his case for a conference on Cambodia more credible and plausible by first convening conferences on other regional trouble-spots.

5.4 Adaptation

The ability to remain non-aligned and undertake proactive action meant that neither man regarded their foreign policy as static; neutralism could be adjusted to meet specific needs. Sihanouk said in 1956: 'Our policy will adapt itself essentially to the circumstances and events of the world and to the position which will be taken in our regard by the various powers.'²⁸ This adaptive nature was also evident in U Nu's insistence that his government 'would judge an issue or situation on its own terms, taking the action it believed to be "right" in each case.'²⁹ Both leaders adapted their policies by

²⁷ Leifer, *Cambodia*, p.117

²⁸ quoted in Roger Smith, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1965 p.86

²⁹ Johnstone, p.75

adjusting the mood of engagement with other nations depending on changing circumstances.

These circumstances comprised both internal and external developments. In Burma's case, neutralism was useful to ward off potential external aggression, but was also 'suited to its internal politics, in which pro-West rightists conflicted with pro-East Leftists.'³⁰ Neutralism enabled U Nu to balance the opposing views, and also outflank Communist subversive elements by quelling any allegations of links to the "Imperialist West".³¹ Similarly, in Sihanouk's case, neutralism was also necessitated by both internal and external problems. Based on domestic political circumstances in 1954, prior to Sihanouk's consolidation of power, it was possible that 'Sihanouk and his advisors saw that a foreign policy of neutrality was the least likely to meet with the resistance of those whose cooperation was sought. A neutral policy would not only facilitate unification of diverse parties but would also deprive those who chose to remain in opposition of an important political issue.'³² Later, this policy found its justification in external circumstances; namely, Sihanouk's fear of aggression from Thailand and South Vietnam, such that 'by adopting a policy of neutralism, Cambodia hoped to gain "assistance from the Cold War enemy of whatever country threatened it."³³

U Nu and Sihanouk's respective adaptation of Neutralism also took place against a transitional backdrop of changing circumstances: First, a stage of uncertainty – when it

³⁰ Liang, p.220

³¹ Ademola Adeleke, "The strings of Neutralism: Burma and the Colombo Plan", Pacific Affairs, Vol. 76, No.4 Winter 2003-2004, p.597

³² Smith, Cambodia's, p.75

³³ Leifer, Cambodia, p.101

was necessary to seek external help or maintain a low profile–; then to a stage of confidence – when neutrality became a justification for shifting, mediation and even manipulation between the blocs; and finally, to a stage of resignation, when each concluded it was still necessary, even as neutrals, to openly seek great power patronage.

Uncertainty

During their early years in power when domestic stability was uncertain, both U Nu and Sihanouk sought some extent of external alignment and assistance. Although U Nu claimed in 1960 that Burma had ‘followed since independence, the policy of positive neutrality, nonalignment with any bloc’³⁴, the fact remained that at the time of independence, Burma was too weak and chaotic to refuse Great Power influence in the form of economic and military assistance from India, Britain and the United States. For example, at the height of the civil war in 1950, India and Britain provided the Burmese government with small arms and loans, such that U Nu later acknowledged that ‘without the prompt support in arms and ammunition from India, Burma might have suffered the worst fate imaginable.’³⁵ Furthermore, despite declaring in the 1948 that Burma would ‘reject any foreign aid which would be detrimental to the political, economic and strategic freedom of Burma,’ Nu signed the US-Burma Agreement in September 1950, providing for grant aid of US\$8-10 million. So Burma’s ‘neutralist’ policy did not (adapt and) develop fully until a few years after independence.³⁶

³⁴ quoted in Liang, p.59

³⁵ Nu, *Saturday’s*, p.227

³⁶ Liang, p.59

Similarly, Cambodia was not immediately 'neutral' after gaining its independence from France in 1954; instead, Sihanouk initially desired an alliance with the United States, partly due to the observation that neighboring rival Vietnam was being shaped into a bastion of American power, and that it was prudent to side his enemy's backer. It was only in 1955, that Sihanouk, partly due to the influence of U Nu, Nehru, and Chou En-lai at the Bandung Conference, decided to declare a policy of neutralism.³⁷ Despite that, Sihanouk continued to receive aid from the US up to the early 1960s, when the US was paying for 30 percent of his country's military budget, providing most of its arms and supplies, and even stationing a Military Assistance Advisory Group in Cambodia – the only professedly neutral country in the world where this was done.³⁸

In the initial periods of instability, neutralism was also interpreted mostly as a non-aligned and relatively 'passive' strategy. For instance, it was clear that Burma's foreign policy during 1950-51, was 'an unstable compound of internal concern and external fear based on a desire to avoid "entangling alliances."³⁹ The Cambodian government too, when articulating its foreign policy in the mid 1950s, had an 'initial statement of neutrality that implied no more than a decision to abstain from alignment with the West. The neutrality to which Cambodia subscribed was passive; the king did not at that time seek to counterbalance Western influence in Cambodia with that of the

³⁷ Kenneth Ray Young, "Neutralism in Laos and Cambodia", International Studies Quarterly, vol.14, no.2 (Jun, 1970), p.223.

³⁸ Kenton Clymer, "The Break in American Relations with Cambodia:1965" Diplomatic History Volume 23,- Fall 1999, p.201

³⁹ Frank N.Trager, "Burma' s Foreign Policy, 1948-1956: Neutralism, third Force and Rice." Journal of Asian Studies 16.1 (November 1956), p.91

Communist bloc.’⁴⁰ Sihanouk made no attempt at that time to enter into diplomatic relations with Communist China or North Vietnam. ‘Returning from a state visit to Burma in November 1954 – where he was doubtlessly influenced by U Nu’s beliefs – Sihanouk’s view towards neutrality seemed somewhat benign (unlike his later barbed statements) when he urged that ‘in order to safeguard themselves, the large and small nations of Southeast Asia should deploy all of their good will in order to create a center of pacific resistance to all pacts or alliances susceptible to provoking world conflicts. That is to say, a large group of nations should observe neutrality strictly.’⁴¹

Confidence and Clout

As U Nu and Sihanouk grew in political control and confidence however, their style of neutralism changed as well. In 1960, the year Sihanouk became Chief of State, The Times described his ‘policy of so-called neutrality’ as one where he ‘played one power off against another, constantly trimming his sails to take best advantage of the prevailing political winds.’ Such was the combination of confidence and circumstances that, by the 1960s, allowed Sihanouk to adapt neutralism into a policy of proactive partiality rather than passive un-involvement. As Sihanouk cultivated external relations that he deemed beneficial to Cambodia, he also became increasingly aggressive towards those he distrusted. Sihanouk had, by 1960, established a ‘strong bias towards Peking for he was convinced that China would ultimately rule over the whole of Southeast Asia’⁴². In 1960 Cambodia and China signed a Treaty of Friendship and Nonaggression. Emboldened by his links to China, and as his domestic standing peaked during the early

⁴⁰ Smith, pp.76-77

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² THE TIMES 20 June 1960

1960s, Sihanouk broke diplomatic ties with Thailand in 1961, with South Vietnam in 1963, and with the US in 1965 – as he became increasingly convinced that these countries were plotting against him. Towards the mid 1960s, however, as the North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops exploited this shift in Sihanouk’s position to significantly increase their use of Cambodian territory, and as China’s Cultural Revolution threatened to export subversive communist influence and violence to the region, Sihanouk turned back to the West to restore equilibrium. At the end of 1966, the master manipulator began to hint indirectly– via the Filipino Ambassador in Phnom Penh – at the possibility of normalizing relations with the US.⁴³

Throughout this period, even as Sihanouk continued to profess Cambodia’s ‘strict’ foreign policy, it was clear that ‘neutrality’ had evolved to entail independent, flexible and even threatening behavior in order to keep pace with the security shifts in Indochina. Driving this policy was an impulsive and increasingly volatile Sihanouk. For instance, when campaigning to secure international recognition of Cambodia’s borders, Sihanouk confessed that he ‘went so far as threatening friendly countries with breaking our diplomatic relations if their respective governments refused to send me a written declaration officially recognizing the sea and land boundaries of my country’⁴⁴ By 1968, Bernard Gordon observed ‘in the international environment, Sihanouk has sought to benefit from the instability that characterizes international and regional politics in

⁴³ Through the Filipino Ambassador in Phnom Penh, 197. Manila, October 31, 1966. Telegram From the Embassy in the Philippines to the US Department of State/1/ FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1964-1968, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs, Department of State, Washington, DC,

⁴⁴ <http://www.norodomsihanouk.info/index.html> - Sihanouk, Document pour l’Histoire: Chapter 6: “The principal cause, reasons and characteristics of the Vietnam-Cambodia conflict.” English translation by H.E. Julio A. Jeldre, 5 Mai 2004

Southeast Asia. His approach in this respect is by now familiar: he threatens first one side, and then the other, and 1968 showed no departure from this pattern or style.⁴⁵

Unlike Sihanouk's combative and manipulative style, U Nu's increase in confidence was marked by positive overtures in Burma's foreign relations. At a time when the Burmese government had surmounted the worst of the Communist insurrection and had received crucial UN support to deal with the KMT troops on its border, the major elements in Burma's foreign policy began to be clearly and ideologically formulated.' Beginning around 1953, with the adoption of a formula for "peaceful coexistence" in Asia,⁴⁶ Burma's foreign policy entered a stage between 1954-1958, known as 'Positive Neutralism', which entailed an expansion of foreign economic relations, mediation efforts, and a general extension of friendship. At the 1955 Bandung Conference, U Nu articulated his ideals for global peace: 'how are the nations of the world to be guided in their relations with each other? I believe that the answer is to be found in the five principles comprising respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs of another state, equality, and mutual benefit. The sum of these principles adds up to our concept of peaceful coexistence.'⁴⁷ After participating in the 1955 Bandung Conference, Burma went on to become one of the official founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement at the first meeting in 1961. In the lead-up to this, U Nu traveled extensively and became one of the most well known and respected leaders of the third world. While Burma's neutralism did not involve playing one power off against another, the similar aspects of personalized diplomacy, and an international

⁴⁵ Gordon, Cambodia, p.62

⁴⁶ Trager, p.95

⁴⁷ U Nu at Bandung Conference, 1955, quoted in Butwell, p.174

influence and clout that far outweighed the size of the country that Sihanouk demonstrated so clearly, were first evident in U Nu's conduct of foreign policy.

Resignation – Unavoidable Allegiances

Despite these activities that seemed to imply a certain degree of autonomy and flexibility, it was clear that U Nu and Sihanouk's respective form of neutralism did in fact lean and was swayed by dependency towards ideological blocs. Such 'alignment' was most apparent in times of crisis or stagnation, when neutralism moved away from strict non-alignment, back to the resignation that security threats could only be handled by cooperating with a stronger country. Although both men tried to maintain an image of non-alignment, their respective inability to resolve internal and external security concerns towards the end of their tenures, made it necessary for allegiance and cooperation with outside powers.

In 1960, for example, Burma drew closer to China than it had ever been –as evidenced by an unprecedented number of goodwill missions and the subsequent signing of a Sino-Burmese border agreement, as well as a Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression. U Nu's inclination towards China was primarily due to unresolved security concerns over the shared border. The un-demarcated Sino-Burmese border was still a thorny issue. Furthermore, the KMT forces (backed by Taiwan, Thailand and the US CIA) still operating against China from within Northeastern Burma, continued to pose a threat of conflict breaking out on Burmese territory; the 1953 UN Resolution that had demanded the evacuation of KMT troops, could not prevent the flow of KMT

reinforcements being flown secretly into Burma on CIA-provided planes. To address both the border and KMT issues, the Sino-Burmese agreements not only demarcated the border, but also allegedly paved the way for a joint Burmese-Chinese campaign against the KMT in 1961.⁴⁸ To U Nu, such cooperation with a Cold War power did not necessarily detract from Burma's non-aligned foreign policy, but rather, was an act of 'friendship'.

For Sihanouk, the threat of unmanageable security concerns also led him to cooperate with various Cold War power blocs. Although his break in ties with Washington and its allies in the mid-1960s had been positioned as a move towards neutrality, Sihanouk soon found this neutrality eroding, and himself a supporter of the Communist cause, when he tolerated the increasing trespass of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces, who used Cambodian territory for sanctuaries and logistical supply routes. Predicting that the Saigon government would soon collapse, Sihanouk wanted to be on the victors' side. However, as the Vietnam War dragged on, Sihanouk began to re-evaluate the situation, and sought to counterbalance his alignment with Hanoi by improving relations with the US; not only did he explicitly allow the 'hot pursuit' of communist troops by US and South Vietnamese forces on Cambodian soil; Sihanouk even allegedly (according to the Nixon administration) permitted or encouraged the US to conduct air strikes on the communist-sanctuaries in his country from March 1969 onwards.⁴⁹ The dilemma Sihanouk was in by the end of the 1960s, and the extent to which his supposed neutrality had polarized both ways, was apparent to all when in the

⁴⁸ Lintner, p.3

⁴⁹ Kenton J. Clymer The United States and Cambodia, 1969-2000: A Troubled Relationship, Routledge, UK, 2004, p.12

single month of June 1969, full diplomatic relations were restored between Phnom Penh and Washington, even as Cambodia became the first foreign government to recognize the newly established Viet-Cong led Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Given how both U Nu and Sihanouk adapted their foreign policies to suit their immediate circumstances, it was not surprising that such opportunism would be cause for criticism. Sihanouk was often described as a ‘mercurial’ tight-rope walker – a portrayal he was proud of – whose foreign policy was fraught with danger and brinkmanship;⁵⁰ he was also less glamorously described in terms of a reactionary melodramatic who lacked a long-term plan, but whose foreign policy actions resembled ‘a small, intelligent trapped animal desperately seeking exit from trap, dashing back and forth all directions, and keeping up continuous high-pitched shrieking’⁵¹. Burma was accused of sitting on the fence’, with the implication that it was ‘waiting to jump on the winning side.’ U Nu was ‘accused of spreading himself too thin in too many directions’ as ‘Burmese neutralism seemed to lean left and then right, to “swim with the tide”, out of an anxiety to preserve Burmese independence.’⁵² Both leaders were criticized for adopting a form of neutralism that could endanger their countries.

It should be assessed therefore, whether these criticisms were justified; if Neutralism was truly a viable option for U Nu and Sihanouk and whether it helped or threatened the security of their nations.

⁵⁰ Kambuja, June 15, 1967

⁵¹ Telegram From the Embassy in Cambodia to the Department of State, Phnom Penh, March 26, 1964, US Department of State, Central Files, POL 27-13 CAMB, para 123.

⁵² Thomson, p.282

5.5 Assessment of Neutralism

On balance, it can be argued that neutralism was certainly a feasible foreign policy option for both men from the outset. It promised a “safe road” through the intensifying Cold War tension; and was a logical choice for countries just emerging from colonialism, that did not want to become subservient to yet another foreign power or influence. In practice however, the viability of neutralism, as interpreted and implemented by each man, was more debatable, depending how one weighs the pros and cons of U Nu and Sianouk’s respective approach to foreign policy.

Benefits

Neutralism benefited Burma and Cambodia in various ways. It helped Burma achieve status in the world community; it permitted Burma to offer friendship to all, without burdensome obligations; and during the formative period from 1948-53, it was a policy that, in Burmese minds, allowed them considerable freedom of action. In September 1954, U Nu, at the peak of his career, took proud count of its results; Burma had good relations with almost every country – Nationalist China was an obvious exception – and was playing its “little part in the establishment of friendly relations between countries and in the promotion of mutually advantageous activities.”⁵³ That same year, Nu told a National Day mass rally, that Neutrality had ‘saved Burma from becoming a second Korea, Indochina, or Guatemala’ even though Chinese Nationalist troops were present on its territory.⁵⁴ Nu was referring to neutrality having reduced the country’s potential as a pawn or threat in the Cold War, thereby removing any reason for

⁵³ Ibid.p.276

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.193

external powers to fight on its soil. Ironically, a decade later, such a conflict was the reality facing Sihanouk, who was unable to use his neutrality to prevent the North Vietnamese presence from dragging Cambodia into the Second Indochina war.

At Sihanouk's peak too, in 1960, neutralism seemed a workable formula to protect his country's international interests. As it had done for Burma, 'neutrality' brought benefits of foreign "aid-without -strings" to Cambodia from foreign powers, which competed for influence through the provision of financial, technical and advisory assistance.⁵⁵ Up till the mid-1960s, the policy of neutralism also seemed to be able to keep the escalating Indochina war out of Cambodia.

Hindrances

From another angle however, the effectiveness of being neutral was debatable; afterall, the neutral status of their countries was not much of a deterrent to would-be trespassers in a world structured along Cold War divisions: Burma 'suffered from a legacy of the Chinese civil war as the presence of Chinese Nationalist Party/Kuomintang (KMT) irregulars created a virtually autonomous and hostile state within Burma'; and Cambodia suffered from the legacy of the First Indochina war as North Vietnamese increased their unauthorized use of Cambodian territory for logistics and sanctuary purposes.

Despite the initial benefits, the path of Neutralism led to difficulty and danger. In Cambodia's case especially, Neutralism, while initially a label that implied a positive

⁵⁵ Roger Smith, pp.87-139

desire to be free of Cold War entanglements, became in Sihanouk's hands, a convenient excuse for him to indulge in shifting allegiances. Neutralism was Sihanouk's "passport" that allowed him to break ties as easily as he forged them. As his decisions in this regard were often guided by his own erratic personality, Cambodia's security became compromised.

For instance, Sihanouk contributed to the destabilization of regional security by playing up the intense personal and historical rivalry that Cambodia had with South Vietnam and Thailand, leaving no room for constructive engagement. Rather, he elevated a tense situation into a larger Cold War issue, first by seeking international guarantee for Cambodia's borders in the early 1960s, then threatening to side with the Communist bloc if his demands were not met. 'Regional rivalries were so prevalent that the US President's Military Representative, General Maxwell Taylor, concluded in September 1962 that Sihanouk's "morbid fear" of Thailand and South Vietnam had "created a situation of tension and emotionalism which might blow up at any time.'"⁵⁶

Instead of the immunization against conflict that Sihanouk had hoped for, his practice of a proactive and adaptive neutralism resulted in his, and Cambodia's, increasing isolation and vulnerability as he swung from one allegiance to another based on personal beliefs. For instance, when Sihanouk undertook a campaign of anti-American abuse in public statements in the early 1960s, his actions were "rationalized" by suspicions that the US was plotting his downfall (as the CIA did against South

⁵⁶ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-63, Vol XXIII, Southeast Asia Office of the Historian Office of the Historian Bureau of Public Affairs United States Department of State, March 6, 1995, para 93

Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem) and that the US "endorsed" Thai and Vietnamese conspiracies against Cambodia. True to form, when Sihanouk decided to cut economic ties with the US in 1963, an act triggered by personal affront taken to a Newsweek article alleging the Queen Mother ran a "string of bordellos" near the Capital. When Sihanouk broke diplomatic ties with the US in 1965, he knowingly subjected his country to the loss of a vital source of military and economic aid (around US\$400 million between 1955 and 1963) that would never be fully replaced. Considering the US State Department's claim that the US strategic interest was only to keep Cambodia safe and neutral, but had found it almost impossible to work with Sihanouk,⁵⁷ it would seem that Sihanouk's highly personal and volatile practice of neutralism had jeopardized his country's security again.

Although Sihanouk sought to remedy this by leaning toward his "friends", France and China, he came away disappointed. De Gaulle's visit to Cambodia in August 1966 and offer of aid was less than Sihanouk had hoped.⁵⁸ The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, followed by Sihanouk's anti-Maoist campaign in 1967 dashed any hopes of closer ties with China; for fear that ideological fanaticism would spread to threaten Cambodia's government.⁵⁹ As the situation in and around Cambodia worsened – with an escalation of North Vietnamese troop activity on Khmer soil – Sihanouk grew desperate enough to re-establish ties with the US in 1969, but it was too little too late, as the Americans had grown wary of Sihanouk's unreliability and were beginning to consider alternative options. By 1970, his frequent shifts in loyalties had left him without a strong foreign voice willing to back him against internal opposition. More

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Osborne, p.151

⁵⁹ Charles Meyer, *Derriere le sourire khmer*, Paris:Librairie Plon pp.248-9

damagingly, his toleration of – or impotence in the face of – the presence of Viet Cong troops in Cambodia frustrated and angered Khmer rightists and military elites who favored an American alliance to solve the Indo-china crisis.

In comparison, U Nu did not have to contend with such risks of being isolated in times of crisis. On the contrary, the primary danger of Burma's neutralism was that it actually led the Burma government perilously close to alignment with Communist China.⁶⁰ Despite the assertions to an 'independent foreign policy', the reality was that the 'Chinese communists could exercise a virtual veto on Burma policy and actions and Burma's 'positive neutrality' could become nothing more than a verbal declaration.⁶¹ The policy therefore, was less than fully effective in securing Burma's independent future, as Burma was trapped in a state of semi-dependency on China. Fortunately for Burma, China never put strong pressure on Burma; and to U Nu's credit, despite his country's close ties with China, he did continue to make conscious efforts to limit such dependence even as late as 1961, such as in choosing to purchase arms from either the British or the Americans rather than from the communist countries.⁶²

Different Circumstances, Different Personalities, Different Outcome

Neutralism as adapted respectively by U Nu and Sihanouk, led to different outcomes for each man. Was the policy more effective for one but not the other? If so, what were some possible reasons for this?

⁶⁰ Johnstone, p.294

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Butwell, p.237

Different Circumstances

On one hand, the answer could be found in their different circumstances. Although the risk of a Chinese communist invasion of Burma to quell renegade KMT forces was real and did in fact take place in 1956 when Chinese troops clashed with Burmese patrols in Northeast Burma, U Nu never had to contend with the high level stakes or the degree of intensity that were associated with the Indochina conflict. Furthermore, the reason neutralism ‘worked’ for Burma may have had less to do with the ‘rightness’ of the policy⁶³ and more to do with ‘a variety of changing circumstances where the major contestants in the cold war were unwilling to use their power to force a change in Burma.’⁶⁴

This was not the case for Sihanouk, much of whose posturing and petitioning in the 1960s was due to real and perceived attempts by other powers to impose change on Cambodia. For instance, although Sihanouk had tolerated Viet Cong bases inside the Cambodian border since 1965, it was partly due to Chinese (in addition to North Vietnamese) pressure that Sihanouk secretly allowed the Viet Cong to open a smuggling route via the port of Sihanoukville in 1966.⁶⁵ Granted, Sihanouk often interpreted others’ intentions through a lens of suspicion and over-sensitivity – such as his allegations of American-led “imperialism” and conspiracies against Cambodia – but it was also true that the US took undue interest in Cambodia’s political development, due to its strategic value and location in the US’ “domino theory”. By comparison, the US acknowledged

⁶³ Johnstone, p.298

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Samuel Lipsman, Edward Doyle, et al. *Fighting for Time*, Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1983, p. 127.

that Burma was not as influenced by the insurgencies in Laos and South Vietnam as the rest of mainland Southeast Asia was.⁶⁶ As such, when faced with increasing evidence that Cambodian territory was being used as Vietcong supply trails and sanctuaries, the US resorted to drastic measures, including cross-border raids, and ultimately covert bombing, to disrupt communist operations, thus dragging Cambodia directly into the Indochina conflict. In this sense, it would be unfair to say neutralism ‘worked better’ for U Nu, given the demanding conditions facing Sihanouk.

Different Personalities

On the other hand, perhaps the answer also lay partially in the personality of each man, in the way each projected his characteristics, beliefs and idiosyncrasies on foreign policy. For instance, Michael Leifer observed that the choice of neutrality in Cambodia was partly because it satisfied Sihanouk’s personal aspirations of being able to dictate and initiate, rather than adopt a subservient stance, in foreign policy.⁶⁷ Due to the legacy of kingship and the adoration accorded to him in Cambodia, ‘such reverence was part of his psychological sustenance’. Leifer went on to observe that ‘Sihanouk is congenitally incapable of acting as a member of an alliance or the subordinate of a larger grouping’.⁶⁸ A Sihanouk did not want Cambodia to be a neutral ‘also ran’, he never saw it necessary to play by the rules of strict neutrality, but enjoyed manipulating and keeping the Cold War powers on their toes and second-guessing about his next move. Such issues of personal vanity and self-esteem influenced the style of neutralism adopted by Sihanouk

⁶⁶ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XXIII (41, 42, 44, 45) Volume XXIII (Department of State Publication No. 10174; GPO Stock No 044-000-02389-0; ISBN 0-16-042054-7)

⁶⁷ Leifer, p.107

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.109

and the combative and suspicious manner in which he dealt with other nations. Not easily trusting, Sihanouk swayed from one power to the next; after breaking with the US, Sihanouk secretly allowed first the North Vietnamese supplies through the port of Sihanoukville, then the US and South Vietnamese to pursue Vietcong forces into Cambodian territory, before casting his lot with the US and closing Sihanoukville to the North Vietnamese in 1969, when he realized that the communist presence was leading to US bombing raids on his country. Throughout, he continued to publicly deny involvement with either power; which made it difficult to guess his next move. By 1969, however the damage had been done. Under Sihanouk's precipitous decisions and unpredictable personality, 'neutrality' had allowed his country's territorial sovereignty to be compromised by the Indochina conflict.

In contrast, U Nu's life was grounded in Buddhist piety and moral values; and this helped shaped his idealistic understanding towards foreign policy. Nu truly believed in world peace and co-existence with both his neighbours and the major powers, and it was perhaps partly due to his relatively affable and positive outlook on foreign relations helped influence others to treat Burma in the same way. For instance, after Chinese forces invaded Burma's border areas in 1956, Burma was able to utilize moral pressures from friendly nations to resolve the issue through diplomatic channels and to negotiate a Chinese withdrawal and continued talks on the Sino-Burmese border demarcation.

To U Nu and Sihanouk therefore, the choice of "Neutralism" or "Neutrality" as a foreign policy was as much determined by national and historical realities, as it was by

preference or personality. Although the policy initially provided both men a theoretical “moral high ground” and “exclusivity” from Cold War rivalries,⁶⁹ it changed in practice and goals, over time. Burma ‘adapted’ itself towards a ‘limited non-alignment’ through having to remain constantly in China’s shadow, and Cambodia, rather than staying active and relevant to the major powers, had to adapt to an unenviable position by the end of the 1960s where it ‘seemed to be withdrawing from its earlier participation in international affairs; not into isolation, but into a “Cambodia against the rest” strategy.’⁷⁰ Perhaps ‘neutralism’ thus had less practical value than either U Nu or Sihanouk had hoped.

⁶⁹ Scalapino, p.49

⁷⁰ Lindsay, p.220

Chapter 6: Conclusion

“If you fail to take advantage of the opportunity thus offered and waste your valuable time in fights and struggles and playing with insurrection, then the country will go to the dogs...”¹

U Nu and Sihanouk had been accorded unique opportunities to lead their respective countries through independence, towards a promise of stable and secure nationhood. To that end, each man adopted ideologies that reflected his worldview and personality. The previous chapters compared how each leader moved from fortuitous appointments, to a consolidation of power, before reaching a stage of stagnation. From that point, the decline of their respective careers was marked by the loss of initiative and control to other political players. U Nu and Sihanouk were important symbols of leadership, but their magnified public personas could not make up for a decline in actual political power and control of the state. As authority slipped through their grasp and conditions in their countries spiraled out of control, both men were unceremoniously removed from power by opponents who viewed their continued leadership as threats to national security. In essence, the opportunity that had been given them was lost; the potential of their symbolic leadership was left unfulfilled.

This chapter will compare the reasons and pattern of each man’s decline in political legitimacy, and explain why, in spite of – or perhaps due to – the strong symbolism attached to their leadership, neither was able to achieve lasting success. It

¹ U Nu: Burma Looks Ahead, 1951, Convocation Address at the University of Rangoon, December 22, 1951; source: Ministry of Information, Govt. of the Union of Burma, 1953, pp.28-39

will also address the extent to which each man's decisions and failures during his years in power contributed to the subsequent crises that engulfed his country.

6.1 Loss of Authority

U Nu's Decline

U Nu and Sihanouk's decline were set in motion by a loss in authority and control over the state. Burma faced a constitutional crisis after the 1958 AFPFL split into the "Stable" faction led by Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein, and the "Clean" Faction led by Nu. To seek a resolution to the crisis, Nu stepped down as prime minister on 26 October and requested that General Ne Win form a caretaker government to restore political conditions under which new elections could be held. The caretaker period lasted till the April 1960 elections, when U Nu returned to power with his renamed "Union Party (*Pyi Daung Su*) after campaigning on the promise of upholding Buddhism and Democracy. Even though he was Prime Minister again, Nu's stature and political legitimacy had been significantly reduced, however. Observers noted in 1961 that 'U Nu is in a less commanding position...he has failed to display decisive authority or to eliminate factionalism in the Union Party.'² When Nu decided to make good on his campaign promises to establish Buddhism as the State religion, he further alienated many of the non-Buddhist minorities who interpreted this as another unitary attempt by the central government to assimilate the non-Burman states. To make matters worse, Burma's economic difficulties worsened in 1961; oil production had fallen, and the monsoons had

² FO 1961

drastically reduced rice production.³ This combination of political infighting within the Union Party, coupled with problems of inflation and mounting secessionist pressure from minority and ethnic groups who wanted a federal, instead of unitary, state structure, gave the increasingly critical Burmese military, under Ne Win, the excuse to intervene through a coup in March 1962, and remove Nu from power.

Sihanouk's Decline

In a similar trend, Sihanouk's decline was also triggered by the relinquishing and dilution of authority under conditions of political stress. Following the 1966 elections, the first where Sihanouk did not pre-select the candidates, the Cambodian General Assembly became dominated by right-wing elements, led by the strongly anti-Communist and anti-Vietnamese Sirik Matak and General Lon Nol. Lon Nol would go on to head governments from October 1966-1967, and again from August 1969, even as Sihanouk remained Chief of State. The reason Sihanouk endorsed Lon Nol's rise was to curb the growing opposition to his policies amongst the middle class and leftists, whose leaders included Ieng Sary and Saloth Sar (later known as Pol Pot). Beginning with the 1967 uprising in the Samlaut district in the Battambang province over high taxes, unrest spread through Southern Cambodia, affecting eleven of Cambodia's eighteen provinces by 1968, all of which Sihanouk blamed on insurgents he termed "Red Khmers" (Khmer Rouge). The security situation was heightened and made more confusing by Sihanouk's continued dalliance with the North Vietnamese presence in his country's borders, which led to the US decision in 1969 to begin covert bombing of communist sanctuaries in

³ Martin Smith, Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity, London: Zed Books. 1991, p.187

Cambodia. In a meeting with US Senator Mike Mansfield in August 1969, Sihanouk insisted that North Vietnam would inevitably be the victor over Saigon and advised the US to withdraw completely; at the same time 'he went on to say that he knew of American bombing of the sanctuaries and would not protest such bombing as long as the areas under attack were not inhabited by Cambodians – "It is in one's own interest, sometimes, to be bombed," he said, "in this case, the United States kills foreigners who occupy Cambodian territory and does not kill Cambodians"⁴

By the end of the 1960s, Sihanouk was perceived as having surrendered Cambodia's territorial sovereignty to Vietcong sanctuaries, compromised Cambodia's security by indirectly causing and "allowing" US bombing raids, and relinquished personal authority for dealing with the security crises to "strongmen" like Lon Nol. In April 1969, Sihanouk stated that "to deal with the Viet Cong and Viet Minh," he had ordered General Lon Nol "to give up the defensive spirit and adopt an offensive spirit"; unfortunately for Sihanouk, Lon Nol decided that an effective offensive against the Communists was only possible with US help, and without Sihanouk's accomodation of the North Vietnamese. On March 18 1970, while Sihanouk was on an overseas trip to Beijing and Moscow, Lon Nol convened the General Assembly for a vote to depose Sihanouk, and for himself to assume emergency powers.

⁴ Cited in Seymour M. Hersh, The Price of Power; Kissinger in the Nixon White House, SummitBooks,1983, p175

Decline – Comparative Factors

When asked during an interview in 1968, how Cambodia had managed to remain independent, neutral, peaceful and prosperous, Sihanouk cited three reasons – Unity, Leadership and Vigilance. Cambodia was strong, firstly because of the unity of the Khmer peoples and their combined faith in him; secondly because of a strong dedicated leadership which delivered results and was not based not on empty promises; and thirdly, because he had maintained a constant vigilance against external threats and subversive elements.⁵ While the accuracy of the Khmer leader’s claims about himself are questionable, the three factors he stated – **Unity, Leadership and Vigilance** – provide a useful comparative framework with which to analyze the decline of U Nu and Sihanouk’s political careers. Both men rose to power as symbols of unity, but became victims of domestic infighting and splintering; both were accorded strong leadership mandates to fulfill lofty visions of stability and security, but repeated failure to deliver on their promises greatly undermined their political credibility. As for the last factor, despite their best intentions and ideals, both men were not sufficiently vigilant to realize either the extent of their problems, or the negative consequences of their decisions.

6.2 Unity

U Nu and Sihanouk regarded national unity as crucial to their countries’ success and stability; after all, they were initially elevated to their respective positions, to provide symbolic national unity in the midst of political turbulence. Burma’s immediate post-colonial crisis had been the threat of civil war fuelled by attempts at secession and

⁵ Interview – “Responses of Norodom Sihanouk”, (William Attwood, interviewer). LOOK Magazine, 2 April 1968

rebellion from various political and ethnic parties. Under such circumstances, U Nu was regarded as the man most able to mediate and bring balance to the dissenting forces in his country due to his piety and personality. In Cambodia's case, the newly granted independence by France in 1953 made it necessary for a leader who could rally and tide the country peacefully through this transition, without being affected by the rising violence against colonial rule in other parts of Indochina. From the Khmer perspective, there was also the need to rally national opinion to ensure that Cambodia 'would be in a position to demand the complete withdrawal of all Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, if and when the parties to the Indochina conflict agreed to seek a diplomatic settlement.'⁶ Sihanouk, by virtue of his kingly status and youth was seen as the rallying symbol who could maintain stability and loyalty amongst the Cambodians throughout this turbulent period.

Both men gradually embraced their roles as public symbols, and began to shape their careers around the goal of unity and nationalism. U Nu made it his personal mission, not only to mediate between dissenting parties, but also to enlighten and enhance the moral fiber of the nation –particularly through religion– as the basis for unity. Sihanouk, after 'achieving' independence, continued his personal crusade to explain and emphasize Cambodian national identity. Internally, he stressed the importance of the monarchy, without which, he believed, Cambodia would fall to the divisive class conflict of communism; to his external audience, Sihanouk expounded on Cambodia's ideology of Buddhist Socialism and status of Neutrality that distinguished

⁶ Peter A. Poole, "Cambodia: The Cost of Survival" in Asian Survey, Vol. 12, No. 2. (Feb., 1972), p.148

Khmer from Cold War ideologies. Despite these efforts, however, it was the lack of political and national unity that proved a crucial destabilizing factor at the end of their respective tenures.

Burma – Internal Disintegration

In U Nu's case, internal disintegration – at both the political and national level – was the main reason for his decline. Politically, U Nu's inability to prevent either the AFPFL split or infighting within his subsequent Union Party demonstrated to the military that parliamentary democracy under his leadership was unworkable. The British Foreign Office in Burma observed at the end of 1960 that, 'More time and energy has ostensibly been devoted by U Nu to peace-making than to working out government policy and pushing on with administration'⁷. Following the military coup in 1962, General Ne Win was even viewed by the US State Department as a 'dedicated nationalist' who 'took power in a Burma that had used the forum of parliamentary democracy as an opportunity for endless political squabbling and corruption.'⁸ This demonstrated the extent to which the political legitimacy of Nu's government been affected by internal dissension.

A more damaging factor was Nu's failure to draw Burma's ethnic nationalities into his vision of national unity. Burma's ethnic states had initially been promised the right to equality, self-determination and wide autonomy within the proposed Union of Burma by Aung San at the signing of the Panglong Accords in 1947; yet, after Aung

"British Embassy, Rangoon, Burma Annual Review for 1960," from Asia: Official British Documents 1945-65, ed. Michael Kandiah, Gillian Staerck and Christopher Staerck, Routledge, 1999, para 6.

⁸ US State Dept, September 8-10, 1966, Ambassador Byroade's Cable of August 18 on Meetings With General Ne Win - Washington

San's death, the eventual Union Constitution provided a non-federal structure in which the states' relations to Burma were asymmetrical and subordinate. Despite these unsatisfactory terms, the Shan, Kachin and other ethnic nationalities leaders cooperated out of necessity as Burma sank into civil war, but also due to Nu's assurance that the terms could be amended in the future, with the right to secession after 10 years of independence as "insurance". Up till the AFPFL split in 1958 and the establishment of the caretaker military government, U Nu was still 'tolerated' for his apparent ability to keep Burma's various races (except the Karen) united.⁹ This did not last, however, especially after Nu's promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961. The Christian Kachins, and other non-Buddhist nationalities regarded this as a betrayal of Aung San's promise at Panglong and his vision of a secular, pluralist state; instead of a symbol of unity, Nu's policy was vilified as a symbol of Burman tyranny. As the Kachins resorted to armed rebellion, and the Shan, with other nationalities pressurized Nu for a federal structure, 'the political ability of U Nu to unify the various ethnic groups declined dramatically in 1961.¹⁰ Nu's seeming inability to stem the tide of secession was the immediate occasion for the coup in 1962¹¹; the military intervened before a federal seminar to resolve the minorities' issue – which might have risked the Union's disintegration – could conclude. U Nu had lost his value as a symbol of unity; 'Ne Win and the military leaders 'had come to see themselves as the lone protectors of the Union's national integrity and the Federal Movement as merely another guise for the insurgents'

⁹ Richard Butwell, "4 Failures of U Nu's Second Premiership", Asian Survey, Vol. 2, No. 1, Mar 1962, p.5

¹⁰ Ibid, p.6

¹¹ Ibid

separatist demands.’¹²

Cambodia’s Political Splintering

Compared to U Nu, Sihanouk did not have to deal with crises of ethnic divisions; rather, his challenge was to keep the various political players united in support of, or at least in subservience to him. In Sihanouk’s case, it was a splintering in the unity of the ruling elite, rather than the general population, that caused his downfall. Sihanouk had previously “united” the various schisms of Cambodian politics under the banner of the Sangkum, and under his dominant personality as Chief of State. By the mid 1960s, however, there were wide and threatening cracks in the edifice of the state.¹³ With a rising educated middle-class whose sons found it increasingly difficult to gain employment, and a polarizing of left and right elements that resulted in a right-wing government and a move by the leftists to incite rural unrest, Sihanouk tried to rise above domestic dissension by appealing directly to the general populace. Although he continued to be revered by the majority of peasants and workers due to his periodic tours of the provinces, dismal conditions in Cambodia, including economic stagnation, persistent corruption and perceptions of social inequality gradually alienated the elite and middle class whose support was vital for his survival.¹⁴ Many of the military and political elites blamed their country’s economic and security problems on Sihanouk’s termination of US aid in 1963, his nationalization policies, and his tolerance of the increasing North Vietnamese presence in Cambodia’s borders. Believing that he would not be threatened

¹² Smith, p.196

¹³ Milton Osborne, Politics and Power in Cambodia: The Sihanouk Years, Australia: Longman, 1973, p.82

¹⁴ Ibid, p.204

as long as the general population continued to have faith in him, Sihanouk made the mistake of leaving the traditional Khmer elite free to occupy office and eventually use their traditional power against him.¹⁵

Symbolic Unity: the AFPFL and the Sangkum

A similar trait between U Nu and Sihanouk in their quest for unity was their inability to translate symbolic unity into actual cohesion. This was evident in their use of respective political vehicles that they claimed to be united movements, rather than political parties, namely the AFPFL and the Sangkum. Both organizations aimed to subsume political and ideological differences under national interest and goals.

U Nu's idealism was reflected in his claim in 1949 that 'the AFPFL is the best instrument for securing peace, for under its banner the Burmese masses are united as never before... so long as the AFPFL can hold the Burmese masses, I am convinced that the danger of internal security cannot be serious.'¹⁶ Yet less than a decade later, years of political struggle and corruption within the AFPFL turned it into the main cause for the Burmese government's instability and paralysis. Under Aung San, the AFPFL had represented a conglomerate of diverse political ideologies and affinities, joined by the immediate common goal of achieving Independence for Burma; but in the vacuum of Aung San's demise, and after independence was achieved, the AFPFL became a tired symbol that had served its purpose, but which U Nu had little choice but to maintain as part of his predecessor's legacy. As opposing personalities and ideologies were forced to

¹⁵ T. D. Allman, Far Eastern Economic Review: April 2, 1970

¹⁶ U Nu, 1949, "Towards A Lasting Peace", p.41

co-exist under this façade of “unity”, Nu was unable to contain or appease rivalries, despite resigning as Premier during the mid 1950s. The AFPFL entered a stage of power struggle up to the split in 1958 that shattered its image as an organization of national and political unity. ‘What had begun as an all-embracing nationalist movement for Burma’s independence, degenerated over the years into a struggle for power among the leaders, disagreement over ideology and a growing pattern of irresponsibility and corruption.’¹⁷

The AFPFL was not, however, ‘orchestrated’ like the Sangkum, where Sihanouk personally oversaw selection of election candidates (up till 1966) and projected an image of a just and popular ruler to the people who brought their grievances to the Sangkum’s twice yearly Congresses. Overt rivalry and power struggle did not arise in the Sangkum as they did in the AFPFL due largely to Sihanouk’s over-powering presence. On the other hand, Sihanouk’s dominance and intolerance within the Sangkum may have blinded him to the reality of increasing domestic opposition. In this sense, the Sangkum represented a “façade” of sorts as well since Sihanouk believed that the Sangkum represented his political mandate to rule. Up till 1969, he still claimed that ‘the power which I assumed in the name of the Sangkum is not mine but results from the will of more than 90% of my countrymen.’¹⁸ In reality, however, by the end of the 1960s, the Sangkum was dominated with right-wing conservatives that opposed Sihanouk’s courting of Vietnamese communists; fearing a split in the *Sangkum*, Sihanouk resorted to forming a counter “shadow” government comprising his most loyal personal followers and leading leftists,

¹⁷ Josef Silverstein (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Aung San*. Rev. (ed.), Southeast Asia Program Series, no. 11. Ithaca, N.Y: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993, p.394

¹⁸ “Statement by Samdech Head of State to the London Times and the New Delhi Statesman”, *Kambuja*, Feb 1969, p.22

to restrain Lon Nol. This only drove another wedge into Sihanouk's splintering political platform.

Failure to recognize that symbolic unity was not enough de-railed both U Nu and Sihanouk's careers. U Nu's decade-long attempts to maintain a semblance of AFPFL unity in the face of overwhelming odds distracted him from the task of governance, and gave the military cause to impose a more authoritarian alternative. Sihanouk's misplaced confidence in the carefully orchestrated processes of the Sangkum caused him to underestimate the threat posed by the disgruntled Cambodian elite and middle class; and his desire to keep the symbolic unity of the Sangkum intact by balancing the different political elements indirectly led to further polarization and chaos in Cambodian politics.

6.3 Leadership

Personal Politics

U Nu and Sihanouk rose to power on strong symbolic mandates; Nu as successor and would-be fulfiller of Aung San's legacy and vision; and Sihanouk as the god-king who had won independence for his "little people." Neither man was able to build on this initial advantage and authority, however, but instead, as time passed, both were perceived as incapable of either effective leadership or sound judgment. Two reasons stand out; firstly, U Nu and Sihanouk engaged in "Politics by Personality", meaning that they often led more by heart, emotion and personal appeal than by considered and pragmatic effort. As a result, both men excelled at expounding on their personal visions and beliefs, their goals and roadmaps, but fell short when it came to delivering on promises and practical

solutions. Secondly, their respective responses to the realities of problems and challenges were found lacking; faced with critical challenges, both men either retreated, or they delegated authority and tasked others to overcome the country's problems – U Nu had asked Ne Win to set up a caretaker government to restore stable conditions necessary for elections; Sihanouk had moved Lon Nol into power to deal with mounting problems of civil unrest. By delegating authority, even temporarily, not only did they weaken their own control of the state, but it was tantamount to admitting their failure and impotence.

Beliefs and Worldview

U Nu and Sihanouk's leadership styles were affected and steered by their beliefs and character. As a staunch believer in Buddhism and moral values, U Nu thought it more crucial for leaders to have integrity rather than enforce control. He claimed that 'if we have good men it does not matter if we have no power. The country cannot be ruined. Whether we get power or not we must only strive to show that the men we have are all good men.'¹⁹ As Nu sought to establish his party and politics on the basis of his beliefs and moral code, the tendency to over-value the personal and discount the systematic and technical, became his Achilles heel. Where the controlling philosophy was that 'good men make good government' and personal character was often set over against plan and technique, such 'government by character rather than by principle, may have disguised the government's indisposition or inability to plan and execute intelligently.'²⁰

Through relying on his religious and moral beliefs as guiding markers, Nu's

¹⁹ Nu, talk November 17, 1959, quoted in Butwell, p.125

²⁰ Winston Lee King, A Thousand Lives Away: Buddhism in Contemporary Burma. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1964, pp.275-276

leadership and policies came to be severely criticized. For instance, after establishing Buddhism as the state religion in 1961, he was accused of using religion, ‘not as the opiate of the people, but as his own opiate – a convenient escape from hard realities. Unstable politics, a stagnant economy? Propitiate the nats, build 60000 sand pagodas. “Buddhism and worship of the spirits have become the solace for U Nu in the midst of all the political and economic troubles which are today confronting his government and his party.”²¹ More damagingly, Nu’s government was distracted, as ‘economic questions were of secondary importance during the 1961 budget session of the Parliament, which was primarily concerned with making Buddhism the state religion.’ Nu’s desire to advance his country through moral and social transformation was also evident in his understanding and adoption of socialism ‘more as a device for social equalization than for economic development.’²² This became a point of contention for his critics amongst the military, whose mission statement of “The Burmese Way to Socialism” in the wake of the 1962 coup emphasized the economic and developmental aspects of Socialism which they felt had been lacking in Nu’s interpretation and practice.

Just as Nu stubbornly followed his heart and morals in implementing policies, Sihanouk’s judgment was clouded by a sincere – even if misguided – sense of patriotism and justice. Sihanouk’s unchanging goal, he claimed, was for ‘the preservation of all that is good in our national heritage.’²³ Under this self-proclaimed mandate, critical opinions – even when constructive – were dismissed as disloyalty and lack of understanding.

²¹ Donald Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, , p.185

²² Butwell, p.8

²³ Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with CIA: The Memoirs of Prince Norodom Sihanouk* (as related to Wilfred Burchett), New York: Pantheon books, 1973, p.132

Sihanouk stated that ‘it is difficult for outsiders to understand the depth of Cambodian patriotism. It is a matter of survival, imposed upon us by our fate of being squeezed in between stronger, hostile neighbours. In the past we invariably had to fight or disappear as a nation. Today it is the same...we fight to survive.’²⁴ The result of this defensive worldview was a combative and inherently suspicious approach to foreign relations that was not always rational. Sihanouk also believed that ‘there could be no political independence without economic and financial independence.’²⁵ This led to his costly decisions to break economic ties with the US in 1963 that deprived the disgruntled military of a precious income source, and further depleted the national budget. Believing in the infallibility of Khmer culture and tradition, Sihanouk did not waver from his faith in Cambodia’s ‘recourse to socialist formulae, inspired by Buddhism, for social and economic development...just as Cambodian society had for centuries past, lived according to the precepts of Buddha.’ In practice, however, the nationalization of key economic sectors and industries, coupled with a corrupt bureaucracy, only led to economic mismanagement and stagnation. By 1969, Cambodia’s list of problems included rising rural indebtedness, declining rice yields and severe inefficiency and waste in the industrialization and developmental programs. Yet, Sihanouk’s nationalistic faith in Khmer socialism was so strong that he was unable or unwilling to consider practical solutions based on cost-benefit analysis.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid, p.195

²⁵ Ibid, p.94

²⁶ Osborne p.204

Character and Personality

Nu's leadership lacked decisiveness and forcefulness, a perceived weakness caused by his benign character. British Governor Hubert Rance noted, "the only thing I would every say against Nu is that he utterly lacked a capacity for ruthlessness in the months leading up to, and following, independence. If he had been of a more ruthless mould, I think Burma might have escaped a great deal of its post war insurgent difficulties". 'U Nu often told the story of the cobra that got away because he spent so long deciding whether or not he had the right to take its life.'²⁷ Hesitation and indecision led to an inefficient government and a Union that constantly remained vulnerable to ethnic and political secession throughout his tenure. U Nu's preference for consultation and compromise over authoritarian decisions was eventually seen by the military as a weakness of the civilian government. As Gustaaf Houtman notes in his study of 'Burmese Mental Culture',²⁸ Burma's Buddhist-influenced ideal of political leadership comprised both "distributed influence" (*awza*) and "centralized authority" (*ana*). When U Nu's style of predominantly *awza* leadership was deemed insufficient for Burma's political problems, Ne Win's replacement of Nu's regime (itself explainable by the Buddhist concept of "impermanence" (*anicca*) effectively shifted Burma's political model to the other extreme of an *ana* influenced dictatorial model.

In contrast to Nu's passive personality, Sihanouk was aggressive and outspoken: when combined with his other traits of double-minded impulsiveness, vanity and

²⁷ William Francis Hare, "Memoirs, Earl of Listowel, Secretary of State for Burma until Independence: 1948" (1996) - <http://www.redrice.com/listowel/index.html>

²⁸ Gustaaf Houtman. Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics. ILCAA Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia & Africa Monograph Series 33, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999, Chpt 6

sensitivity to criticism, his leadership style was often rash, irrational and confrontational. This indirectly endangered Cambodia and his own position, as it made it difficult for countries to dialogue, much less extend any cooperation to Sihanouk, at a time when Cambodia needed international backing to ensure its security. For instance, when the US began to re-initiate links to Cambodia in January 1968, diplomat Chester Bowles stated that the US aim at this point was 'to keep Cambodia neutral, to keep the Viet Cong and NVA out of its territory and, with an eye to the future, to improve our own relations with this small but important country'; at the same time, he cautioned that he was 'fully conscious of mercurial and unpredictable characteristics of the Prince. In any dealings with Cambodia we must expect sudden switches and caustic and unfair criticism. However, we should not let Sihanouk's intemperate and sometimes childish outbursts deter us from the main business at hand.'²⁹

Unfortunately, Sihanouk did deter the process, continuing to lambaste the US publicly for its misguided policy in Indochina, even as he began to consider improving ties to counterbalance the increasing North Vietnamese threat. Although the main issue of contention with the US was over the lack of a satisfactory declaration to guarantee Cambodia's borders against its neighbors, Sihanouk's attitude and ambiguity did not help matters. By the end of 1968, the US Pacific Commander in Chief highlighted Sihanouk's unreliability and inconsistency when he concluded that 'Sihanouk has been of more value to the Communists as a "neutralist" than as a declared ally; the Communists have been getting all the support they can use plus the bonuses of sanctuary and a secure, natural

²⁹ Telegram From the Embassy in India to the Department of State/1/ New Delhi, January 12, 1968, 1523Z. /1/Source: Department of State, Central Files, POL 7 US/Bowles. Secret.1 8395. Bowles Mission. 229.

extension of the Lao line of communication. At various times, Sihanouk has both admitted and denied that Cambodia is a Viet Cong sanctuary. He has never admitted, or perhaps has failed to recognize, Cambodia's ultimate role in the Communist design for Indochinese hegemony'.³⁰ By the time Nixon took office as President in 1969 and began to re-evaluate (with Kissinger) American involvement in Indochina, the US had grown weary of Sihanouk's temperament and leadership. To this day, Sihanouk remains convinced that the CIA conspired with Lon Nol and other conservatives to topple him. What Sihanouk does not recognize, however, is that even if his allegations were true, it may have been his own personal style of aggressive and erratic foreign policy that drove the US to see Lon Nol as a viable alternative.

Alternative Leaders

The practice of personalized politics by U Nu and Sihanouk thus opened them to criticism and comparisons. Towards the end of their tenures, both U Nu and Sihanouk found themselves positioned alongside military leaders who contrasted with them in various ways. Where U Nu was indecisive and philosophical, Ne Win's track record till then portrayed him as indomitable and pragmatic; where Sihanouk was emotional and unconvincingly vague about his affections and ability to keep Cambodia free from unrest and intrusions, Lon Nol was coldly, but firmly, committed to quelling domestic insurgencies, and to driving the Vietnamese out of the country with US assistance. In U Nu's case, the military had been bolstered by its successful role in turning the tide of Burma's civil war in the 1950s, such that by the end of the decade, it had gained enough

³⁰ Telegram From the Commander in Chief, Pacific (McCain) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler)/1/ Honolulu, December 18, 1968, 0415Z. /1/Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, 5 (D) 261.

organizational and administrative experience to consider itself a viable and stronger leadership alternative to the ineffective civilian government.³¹ Ne Win's hand in restoring order, both during the civil war, and later after the AFPFL split in 1958, only contrasted with and highlighted the failures of Nu's leadership. In Sihanouk's case, not only had Lon Nol been "given" complete military control by the end of the 1960s³² to quell the insurrections, the administration he formed in August 1969 was termed the government of "National Salvation", to rescue Cambodia from its security and economic woes. Together with deputy premier Sirik Matak, Lon Nol held sway over the right-wing National Assembly and aimed to reverse Sihanouk's damaging nationalization and isolation policies, in favor of greater privatization and closer links with the US, that would help restore the Cambodian elites' wealth and influence.

Both U Nu and Sihanouk had inadvertently allowed these "alternate" leaders to gain state and administrative control by handing them authority during periods of crises or challenge. Although both had begun their careers as strong symbolic leaders, the debunking of the myths surrounding their leadership was accelerated by 'temporary' governments that inadvertently highlighted the flaws of the previous administrations. Ne Win's caretaker government, and Lon Nol's 'Salvation Government' had a common aim of restoring national order, but also had a similar effect of subjecting the legacies of U Nu and Sihanouk to critical assessment. U Nu was "exposed" as a visionary who lacked the institutional influence and administrative ability the military had demonstrated. In Sihanouk's case, 'the image of the Prince as the bulwark of security and progress,

³¹ Mary P. Callahan, Democracy in Burma: The Lessons of History, National Bureau of Asian Research - Analysis Vol 9 No,3, USA 1998, pp.14-16

³² Sihanouk's Letter to the Sunday Times, London, Kambuja, 15 November 1968, p.43

although true for the early years after independence, became increasingly dubious.’³³ As comparisons and contrast between leadership style, ability and agenda mounted, U Nu and Sihanouk’s respective positions were further weakened by the increasing public impression that they tended to seek emotional refuge when under stress, instead of dealing with problems at hand.

Retreat from Reality

Specifically, U Nu and Sihanouk were prone to ‘refreshing’ themselves through creative – and some termed ‘distractive’ – pursuits. U Nu’s refuge was found through Buddhist meditation: ‘it too often happened that the nation’s business stood virtually still, while U Nu spiritually refreshed himself at his inner springs. It was perhaps as much the artist-creator as the religious devotee in him who required from time to time these escapes, to permit him to muse and re-establish contact with his essential self. But with this element in his personality, the Prime Minister came at a heavy price to the nation.’³⁴ Perhaps the same could be said of Sihanouk, where the need to ‘re-establish contact with his inner-self’ and pursue his “artist-creator” instincts, took place through his increasing obsession with movie-making even as his country’s problems mounted.

Such “retreats” were cause for criticism that U Nu and Sihanouk had lost the will and legitimacy to govern. To U Nu, meditation was a necessary discipline for a statesman to avoid the pitfalls of politics and to formulate policies. After the AFPFL split, Nu spent considerable time in meditation; and before beginning the 1959–1960 campaign

³³ JLS Girling, *ISEAS Occasional Paper No.7: Cambodia and the Sihanouk Myths*, June 1971, p.5

³⁴ Loius J Walinsky, *Economic Development in Burma, 1951-1960*. New York: 1962, p.277

that returned him to power, he also spent five or six weeks in solitary meditation.³⁵ The timing and appropriateness of his retreats was questioned however; from 1960-61, when faced with infighting within the Union Party between the older '*Thakins*' and the younger '*U-Bos*', Nu was unable to mediate between the two sides; rather, his increasing preoccupation with Buddhism, including a Buddhist retreat for 45 days in mid-1961 when economic and political problems remained unresolved, suggested that he had lost the will to govern.'³⁶ In Sihanouk's case, he claimed in 1969 that 'movie-making...is achieving a useful purpose ... It enables me to show to foreign friends all aspects of both modern and traditional Cambodia, and to present truthful pictures so different from those suggested by the Western press. It further enables me to create and promote a new cinematographic style to oppose invading and stifling foreign trends.'³⁷ The reality, however, was that Sihanouk's amateurish films often depicted lavish lifestyles and settings completely unrepresentative of general Cambodian living standards; when screened outside of Phnom Penh, not only was the awareness of social inequality heightened, but it also left Sihanouk's critics wondering if he should devote more effort to deterring actual foreign invasions instead of making films. Sihanouk's excessive devotion to artistic pursuits was noted by Nixon, who observed that Sihanouk, "seemed prouder of his musical talents than of his political leadership, and he appeared to be totally unrealistic about the problems his country faced."³⁸

³⁵ King, p.251

³⁶ Smith, p.187

³⁷ "The Participation of the Nation", Samdech Head of State replies to Mr Robert H Sollen of the New Asia News, Kambuja, p.17, April 1969

³⁸ Shawcross, William. Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979, p 51

U Nu and Sihanouk's character flaws, and their devotion to activities outside of government, combined with the delegation of duty for some of the biggest issues facing their countries, led opponents and observers alike to assume that in many ways, they were incapable of grasping the realities and responsibilities of political leadership.

6.4 Vigilance

This lack of understanding of realities eventually translated into a lack of vigilance towards political threats. Bolstered – but perhaps blindsided – by their popularity and symbolic standing with the people, U Nu and Sihanouk underestimated their opponents, and also underestimated the negative impact of their policies.

Opponents

When U Nu handed state power to Ne Win in 1958, the general promised to return it within 6 months, but ruled for almost two years before elections could be held. Throughout, Nu was confident that the democratic process would prevail in Burma; he failed to heed the warning signs as the caretaker government operated relatively successfully and comfortably outside the democratic process; Ne Win ruled without party support, filling the cabinet and bureaucracy with senior military officers and civil servants. Nu underestimated the general's ambitions and his closely-knit network of second generation officers who would later adopt totalitarian rule. Nu's government, engrossed with infighting and economic problems, had not taken the military's rise in the 1950s seriously; even when the army became the only institution capable of building

nationwide structures of authority.³⁹

Sihanouk also underestimated the ambitions of his country's political figures; as he 'could not believe, or refused to accept, that any serious opposition or criticism could be genuinely Cambodian in origin. To him, all such opposition must derive from the hostile pressures of outside powers, or of their local agents within the country.'⁴⁰ As such, local insurgencies were Viet Minh-inspired; local critics were misled by the lies of foreign press; and challenges to his economic or foreign policy were the result of "imperial", most notably, American manipulation. Sihanouk was supremely confident that he ruled according to the people's in the form of "democracy" he had introduced. As such, he believed that he was the only alternative to an external conqueror; no one else in Cambodia could rise to the task or embody the people's will; he thus had no qualms about literally handing over state power as long as he remained Chief of State. Sihanouk even claimed confidently in 1967 that "our army will not revolt; it understands my attitude perfectly."⁴¹ Interestingly, during his 1955 abdication speech that explained his disconnectedness from the masses when he remained king, Sihanouk had lamented that "I could only see the flowers and hear the lies. The true face of the people was hidden from me."⁴² Ironically, fifteen years later, it was the true face and intentions of Cambodia's political elites to unseat him that Sihanouk was unable to see; the ex-King chose instead to continue drawing affirmation and feedback of his performance from the "flowery"

³⁹ Mary P. Callahan, Democracy in Burma: The Lessons of History, National Bureau of Asian Research - Analysis Vol 9 No,3, p. USA 1998, pp.14-16;.

⁴⁰ Girling, p.4

⁴¹ Samdech speaks on French Canadian Television, Kambuja, 15 Dec 1967, p.14

⁴² March 9, 1955 Abdication Speech by Sihanouk, broadcast to the people; quoted in Rameshwar P. Sinha and Surya Dandekar (eds), Southeast Asia: People's Struggle and Political Identity; 1998, p.6

reviews given by his people each time he toured the countryside.

In this regard, neither U Nu nor Sihanouk was vigilant to the changing political climate or to the capabilities and intentions of political rivals. Where Nu had been distracted by other problems, and perhaps genuinely trusted the military; Sihanouk was misled by overconfidence in his own indispensability. Both believed, however erroneously, that popular mandate alone was sufficient ballast to keep them afloat and above any tides of dissension. Such faith in their symbolic leadership was misplaced. In a sense, this was also partly a result of the unrealistic way each man interpreted and adopted “Democracy”.

Democracy – The Will of the People

In the same way they held up “Neutralism” and “Socialism” as seeming formulas that would produce idealistic results, so too did U Nu and Sihanouk advocate “Democracy” as a lofty vision and basis for their governance. Again, each man interpreted the concept differently. U Nu saw Democracy as the solution to Burma’s governmental inefficiency and infighting, particularly after his 1960 electoral victory; Sihanouk regarded it as a legitimization for his power and policies. But both were alike in allowing their skewed belief in Democracy to blind them to negative political realities.

For instance, Nu did not foresee that his fervent belief in democracy would undermine his authority. Nu had an unrealistic expectation that democracy meant “universal consent” and this inadvertently ‘condemned his new government to indecision,

weakness and dissension. It threatened fragmentation and opened the door, for the second time, to the rule of the military.’⁴³ He failed to grasp the essence of democracy, that ‘within the conventions of majority rule that did not infringe on basic rights of the minority, the majority still needed to have the courage and the will to make the decisions needed.’⁴⁴ Instead, Nu hampered his government’s ability to perform, when he declared in his “Crusade for Democracy” that ‘henceforth, every major problem will be submitted to thorough examination and discussion by all who are concerned therewith.’⁴⁵ This only reinforced the military’s critical perception that Nu, ‘as in the years of his leadership before the 1958 split, had failed to use democratic institutions for the effective governing of his country.’⁴⁶

In comparison, Sihanouk’s belief that his power was the result of “direct democracy”, clouded him to the possibility of dissension and alternative opinions. More damagingly, Sihanouk’s ‘personification of power’ on the pretext of ‘Democracy’ undermined Cambodia’s state institutions and processes of check and balance. Sihanouk had proposed in 1956 a form of ‘direct democracy’ hearkening back to the ‘Greek pattern’ such that ‘the will of the people can really be imposed and heard’ and that the National Congress should become the nation’s supreme policy-making body. Sihanouk claimed that ‘my enemies had brought about the downfall of the government on the pretext of ‘lack of democracy’. I threw democracy back at them in a much purer form,

⁴³ Walinsky, p.280

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ speech by U Nu, in the Chamber of Deputies on April 5. 1960, in Crusade for Democracy, Director of Information, Union of Burma, 1960, p.9

⁴⁶ Butwell, “Four Failures”, p.8

and they were dumbfounded.⁴⁷ This ‘purer form’ was based on the ‘motto of his royal ancestors’ – ‘of the people, for the people, by the people’ –but in practice, was generated by the political structures that were created around his person. In his book, *The Demigods: Charismatic Leadership in the Third World*, Jean Lacouture described how Sihanouk developed a symbol signifying the “relationship between him and his people”, first by abdicating, then by assuming the role of a Chief of State, theoretically backed by the “people’s will”. Through his domination of the media, public speech and political vehicles, Sihanouk created a structure in Cambodian society that had him as the central supporting pillar who had been “democratically elected” to represent the people.⁴⁸ The generated idea that he was a manifestation of the people’s choice and will, blinded him to the fact that his unilateral decisions and authoritarianism were fuelling resentment among the middle-class and elite. Up till the end of his tenure, Sihanouk still claimed that ‘I do wield extensive power...But in no time in my career have I sought to monopolize this power or even to maintain it.’⁴⁹

Compared to Sihanouk, the application of “Democracy” did not create such a “delusional cloud” of personality cult around U Nu. Rather, it was in his unrealistic interpretation of the concept, and the idealistic hope in its promised outcomes, that U Nu failed to see the consequences of his policies. As much as Sihanouk believed that his rule was truly “democratic”, U Nu believed in the “rightness” of “true democracy”. In that sense, both men lacked the ability to discern the ideal from the practical, and the

⁴⁷ Sihanouk, *My War*, p.97

⁴⁸ Jean Lacouture, *Demigods: Charismatic Leadership in the Third World*, NY: Knopf 1970, p.205

⁴⁹ Sangkum, No. 38, September 1968

imagined from the real.

Other Policies and Circumstances

U Nu and Sihanouk also miscalculated the consequences of their policies, and underestimated the severity of their respective circumstances. In U Nu's case, two critical miscalculations were in the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion, and the issue of a Federal state structure. In the first instance, U Nu was convinced that it was the government's responsibility to help the people improve their lives from one cycle to the next, till eventual salvation, according to Buddhist teachings. He stated: Religion was a beneficial institution and those who would gainsay it were wrong. If the government could provide for a life of one hundred years on earth, why should it feel deterred from providing for countless existences afterwards?⁵⁰ U Nu had earlier stated in 1956 that when the non-Buddhists were convinced that their rights would not be compromised, "then it would be right and safe to undertake the move of making Buddhism the State religion."⁵¹ Nu decided the "right moment" was after securing electoral victory in 1960. Unfortunately, the ethnic nationalities were not, in fact, ready; and Nu was unprepared for the backlash of insurrection and demands for secession that followed. To appease the ethnic minorities, Nu agreed in 1962 to open discussions on setting up of separate sovereign states within a federal structure, most notably for the Mons and Arakanese, with consideration for the Shan and Kayah to exercise their rights to secession. Unfortunately, Nu again did not take heed of how the military perceived federalism as a guise for separatism, and the extent to which Ne Win's generals would go to prevent any

⁵⁰ U Nu, *Saturday's Son*, New Haven: Connecticut, London: Yale University Press, 1975, p.199

⁵¹ *The Nation*, May 28, 1956

potential break-up; 'to the Defence Services the unity of the country and preservation of the Union were matters which were not negotiable.'⁵² The Burmese army had been built primarily to cope with domestic unrest; the most-feared outcome of a potential failure by the military to fulfill its mandate had been, and always was portrayed in terms of a disastrous disintegration of the Union.⁵³

Whereas U Nu's problems stemmed primarily from within the country, Sihanouk's challenge lay in Cambodia's external and regional relations, and how those relations impacted internal developments. In that regard, Sihanouk's miscalculations at the end of his tenure were mostly in his practice of "neutrality". By the end of the 1960s, Sihanouk's country was a place where regional Cold War developments were inextricably linked to Cambodia's internal political dynamics. In practice, this meant that even as Cold War players were stepping up their interventions into Cambodian affairs, elements within Cambodia were also being pressured to seek Great Power support. In such a situation, Sihanouk's particular brand of neutrality became a target on his back. To the Americans, any state's adoption of such a posture could only weaken the international position of the United States, to the certain benefit of the Communist powers.'⁵⁴ To right-wing Cambodians like Lon Nol, Sihanouk's so-called neutral policy was to blame for allowing tens of thousands of North Vietnamese to occupy sanctuaries in Cambodia.⁵⁵ Sihanouk was aware of the problem, but chose to downplay its severity. In any case, the

⁵² The Guardian, vol. IX, No. 4, april 1962, "Momentous Month", p.6

⁵³ Mary P Callahan, "When Soldiers Kill Civilians", "Southeast Asia over 3 Generations, essays presented to Ben Anderson, Cornell, SEAP, 2003, p.335

⁵⁴ George Kahin, Southeast Asia: A Testament, Routledge Curzon, Sep 2002, p.261

⁵⁵ Harish C Mehta, Warrior Prince: Norodom Ranariddh Son of King Sihanouk of Cambodia; Graham Brash, Singapore, 2001, p.29

US assessed that even if Sihanouk had wanted to, he could not have dealt with the situation effectively – at the end of 1967, Cambodia only had about 9000 troops manning a 700-mile border along which over 20,000 Communist troops were arrayed.⁵⁶ Sihanouk chose to manage the situation by manipulating Cambodia's internal political dynamics. By tacitly allowing the right to form the government on one hand, he sought to portray an external image of affinity with the Communist powers on the other, thereby keeping himself in power between the two poles. Unfortunately, Sihanouk was not privy to the lack of trust his actions had generated within Cambodia's elite; especially amongst those who did not share his confidence that such a perilous balancing act could be maintained indefinitely. Sihanouk also miscalculated the extent to which the right-wing elements he had endorsed would swing beyond his control, to eventually see him as a threat.

6.5 Concluding Comparisons

Opposites and Overlap

Despite their individual failings in the areas of national unity, leadership and vigilance, U Nu and Sihanouk had admirable intentions. Molded in the fires of transition from colonial rule to independence, both were fervent patriots and nationalists who were somewhat miscast for the roles required of them. U Nu had a genuine love for his fellow-man and his country. Unfortunately for Burma, Nu was also 'a saintly man who abhorred violence and detested politics, not a strong man who had learned that force was necessary

⁵⁶ 220. Special National Intelligence Estimate/1/ SNIE 57/1-67, CIA, Washington, December 14, 1967:.,

to uphold freedom and unity.⁵⁷ Sihanouk had a sincere love for his nation; but he also loved himself, such that ‘he seemed to have believed – from time to time at least – the mythology about himself to the point of confusing himself with Cambodia, and of mistakenly thinking that he could outwit Cold War players like the United States.’⁵⁸ Where Burma may have better dealt with its problems of internal dissension had there been a leader with Sihanouk’s bravado and initiative, Cambodia may have been able to navigate the various Cold War tensions more safely had its leader possessed U Nu’s sincerity and humility. (Interestingly, where “Sihanouk” could be translated as “lion-jaws”, “U Nu” meant “soft, or tender”.)

At a glance, both men were seeming opposites; U Nu’s exemplification of Buddhist piety and humility, contrasted with Sihanouk’s materialism, aggression and arrogance. U Nu represented a colonial-era “New Elite” whereas Sihanouk hailed from a traditional Southeast Asian monarchy. Yet in a sense, both were political products of a “modernizing” era, and demonstrated that in their choice of policy and terminology. Both men also overlapped, in terms of style and situation. Their leadership styles were highly charismatic and personal, with an emphasis on symbolism and ideals rather than pragmatic realities. To guide their countries’ transition from ex-colonies to strong nation-states, U Nu and Sihanouk tried to embody the ideals of traditional leadership, while simultaneously espousing the benefits and workings of modern ideologies. While this may have given immediate relevance to their policies, the over-emphasis of form over substance meant that neither was able to translate imagery and rhetoric into

⁵⁷ Hare, Memoirs

⁵⁸ David Chandler, The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution since 1945, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, p.414

meaningful results over the long run. Whether it was an over-ambitious “Buddhist Socialism”, or a professed “Neutralism” that had lost its credibility after repeated adaptations, U Nu and Sihanouk’s good intentions and doctrines brought few lasting benefits.

More significantly, when placed alongside each other, their respective situations reflected the crux of nation-building and security concerns in post-colonial Southeast Asia –the challenge of building and uniting a nation internally on one hand, while warding off external threats from neighbours and Cold War powers on the other. The history of Burma and Cambodia in the 1950s and 60s represented extreme examples of such security concerns. No other Southeast Asian country faced such a degree or duration of violent ethnic division and strife the way Burma did. And no other country had to bear the magnitude of encroaching forces and threats the way Cambodia did. Perhaps Sihanouk’s words could be taken as a reminder to those who would venture to assess the legacies of either U Nu, or Sihanouk himself: ‘It is, therefore, permitted for us to ask ourselves if other countries would have done better than us and realized more had they been placed under the same conditions...after the restoration of independence.’⁵⁹

Aftermath Assessment

In comparing the circumstances and character under which U Nu and Sihanouk rose to and fell from power, it is clear, on balance, that their character flaws contributed partially, but directly to their downfall. On the other hand however, their choices were often constrained or conditioned by their circumstances. It is, of course, possible to

⁵⁹ Interview with Mr Edward Neilan, Copley News Service, *Kambuja, Aug 1969*

hypothesize if a different reaction or decision by a man of different caliber would have produced an alternative result; but a better assessment of what their respective tenures meant to their countries could be drawn from the immediate aftermath of their careers.

To an extent, both U Nu and Sihanouk were figures who had brought balance to potentially volatile situations. Sihanouk, for example, was fond of recounting that he was the link to over 90% of the Cambodian population; and claiming that after his departure, the persecution of pro-Sihanouk elements by Lon Nol and Sirik Matak ‘cut the Cambodian government from the real Khmer people, thus throwing them into the arms of the Polpotian Khmers Rouges and opening to the latter the door for their complete victory (in April 1975)’⁶⁰ Perhaps it would have been more accurate to say that with Sihanouk’s departure, the absence of the figurehead, no matter how self-absorbed and authoritarian, opened the door to the simmering political divides in Cambodian society. Both the conservative and communist elements saw an opportunity to transform Cambodia. As a result, even as the new right-wing government swept (with South Vietnamese and US support) to eradicate North Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, the communist insurgency within the country grew to unmanageable proportions, and by 1975, Pol Pot’s Communist Party of Kampuchea had taken control of the country, thus marking the beginning of a tragic chapter in Cambodia’s history. As long as Sihanouk had been present, it is arguable that even if his policies and performance were unsatisfactory, at least his overpowering personality kept the lid on Cambodia’s cauldron of potential chaos that had been brewed and heated by the fires of the Indochina conflict.

⁶⁰ Letter to the editor of Indochina Report, March-April 1987
<http://www.norodomsihanouk.info/mes%2004/mars/2003txt5.htm>

In comparison, U Nu's personality, while large, could never supplant that of Aung San. For most of his career, U Nu tried to fulfill the promises and vision left by his predecessor. Aung San had crafted the vision of a united Burma built on socialist principles; but it was left to U Nu, by no means a skilled administrator, to realize the dream. When Nu was deemed to have "failed", it was as much due to his personal inabilities, as it was to the unrealistic standards and goals by which he was judged. Nevertheless, throughout his career, Nu's symbolic leadership provided Burma with a semblance of consultative government, and reasonably positive external relations that had proved crucial to Burma's development and stability in the post-colonial years. As long as U Nu remained, there was always room for dialogue and compromise (even though not every dissenting party chose these options) because of the values of harmony and democracy that he embodied. After Ne Win took over, parliament was dissolved, and the new military regime declared its inward-looking "neutrality" to concentrate on quelling the "separatist tendencies" of the ethnic minorities; thus beginning a period of authoritarian and isolationist government in Burma that continues largely to this day.

By looking at the periods of instability that followed after their departure, it would seem from one angle that U Nu and Sihanouk had been relative bastions of sensibility and stability. On the other hand, it is also arguable that each man helped create the conditions for his country's crises that followed.

In Burma, U Nu's perceived failures inadvertently set the "stage" for Ne Win - or gave him the excuse - to take extreme measures. Nu had failed to consolidate power and

parliamentary democracy under Nu had proved to be an avenue for dissension, divisiveness and potential dissolution of the Union. Ne Win thus put in place draconian measures to enforce his authority and ‘protect national unity’, going to the extent of turning Burma into a one-party state by dissolving all political parties in 1964, except for the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) which he chaired. Nu had failed to quell communist and ethnic insurgencies, so the military government turned its full attention to eradicating all ethnic and political dissent, to the extent of establishing a near-totalitarian state. As for Nu’s two strategies of socialism and neutralism, Ne Win took both ideologies to extremes. Ne Win retained Nu’s policy intent of “neutralism”, but interpreted it through an anti-western and xenophobic stance, by cutting US aid, and eventually alienating Burma from external contact altogether. Ne Win’s fear of external influences also manifested itself through his attempt to “purify” the ideology of “socialism” that U Nu had sought to establish in Burma; Ne Win’s “Burmese Way to Socialism” led to the nationalization of virtually every aspect of the economy, and eventually turned Burma into an autarchy.

In Cambodia, Sihanouk’s autocratic rule and his failure to maintain the security of his country’s borders helped set in motion events that eventually led to civil war. The backlash against Sihanouk’s policies by the Lon Nol-led right-wing conservatives in the immediate aftermath of the coup had been fuelled by Sihanouk’s undermining of Phnom Pehn’s political elites. The swing towards American aid and arms by Lon Nol was intended to reverse the perceived encroachment of Communist Vietnam and leftist forces within Cambodia that Sihanouk had been accused of siding. Unfortunately the untenable

balancing act that Sihanouk had tried to maintain over the years had not only given enough leeway for communist forces to take root in rural Cambodia, but had reached a point of collapse. Sihanouk's removal from power and his subsequent alliance with the Khmer Rouge while in exile further set the stage for civil war. As Sihanouk endorsed the Khmer Rouge, and as Lon Nol abolished the much-revered monarchy and allowed the US to extend its bombing raids against the Viet Minh into rural Cambodian territory, the Khmer Rouge were able to rally many more disaffected rural Cambodians in revolt against Lon Nol's regime. While Sihanouk cannot be blamed for the atrocities that followed after the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, he did have an indirect hand in their ascension. Sihanouk's strategy in dealing with right and left-wing extremism during his tenure had been to play one side against the other, as the situation demanded, as long as he maintained a central role in Cambodian politics. With Sihanouk gone, there was no one and no reason to maintain the balancing act he had orchestrated and it was almost inevitable that years of political tension that Sihanouk had allowed to go unchecked would boil over into violent conflict.

One key failing shared by U Nu and Sihanouk was thus the inability to deal effectively and conclusively with political divisiveness. U Nu could not achieve unity or quell separatist demands and this provided impetus for the rise of a more dominant means of government. Sihanouk's persona dominated Cambodia's political scene, but he could not effectively stem the underlying opposing currents of political tension that became tragically apparent in his absence.

Symbolic Leadership: Boon or Bane?

Perhaps it is fitting then, to conclude this paper on the note it began. Upon U Nu and Sihanouk's departures from their respective political scenes, their absence was immediately felt by the lack of a popular symbol around which the nation could rally. The alternative to such symbolism was authoritarianism, a path taken by both Ne Win and Lon Nol, to command subservience, because their personality and prestige could not command loyalty. Decades later, when commentators remarked on U Nu and Sihanouk's symbolic significance, it was a testament to what they had brought to their countries during their years in power; that despite their flaws in character, decision making and administrative ability, the goals and ideals that each embodied, were seen as vital symbols that gave their people meaning and direction, and even became part of their respective legacies.

Interestingly, however, present-day commentators would also draw comparisons between the Khmer Rouge and the military Government of Burma – “In many ways, the Burmese regime is already turning Burma into a country like Cambodia under Democratic Kampuchea...the Burmese rulers may ignore the world's calls for its return to the democratic path and, as happened in Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge, Burma's would then become an isolated nation with China as the main military and economic ally...As in the case of the Khmer Rouge, the Burmese military junta has become overwhelmingly paranoid about its people and has killed and imprisoned hundreds of people suspected as its dissidents...the Burmese military regime has imposed heavy restrictions on both civil and political rights and freedoms, as the Khmer Rouge had

done.”⁶¹ U Nu and Sihanouk cannot be blamed for the atrocities that followed in their wake, but as “predecessors” to the respective periods of calamity that befell their nations, their careers represented missed opportunities for Burma and Cambodia that may have led to a different, more positive outcome.

In that sense, leadership style that drew heavily on political symbolism may actually have hindered each man’s country from developing into a strong nation and state. In defining a “national populist” regime, Jean Lacouture mentioned three components – the charismatic authority of the leader whose person unites and mobilizes the people; the leader who maintains direct contact with the masses, thus relegating the various elites to the background; and the lack of distinction between social and national objectives.⁶² U Nu and Sihanouk’ displayed these traits: both were symbols of unity; both had a deep connection to the general public that their usurpers did not; and both were sufficiently “distracted” by national objectives of ensuring internal and external security, such that their social and economic policies could not be thoroughly developed. However, Lacouture also mentioned that a regime of this type, ‘whether or not it has a doctrine to justify it, is capable of creating both nation and state; **but it cannot make them endure**. It offers no real solution to the fundamental problem of replacing a society that had been divided by feudalism, tribalism or colonialism with a political society based on participation and responsibility.’⁶³ These words seemed applicable to U Nu and Sihanouk; for their style of symbolic leadership may have cost their countries the opportunity to develop sustainable and stable political institutions and processes, which

⁶¹ http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2007/10/15/pda/opinion_30052426.html

⁶² Lacouture, p.286

⁶³ Ibid. , p.287

in turn might have saved Burma and Cambodia from the respective periods of authoritarianism and anarchy that followed. From this perspective, the careers of U Nu and Sihanouk represented, not a “golden age” before the darkness, but rather, a period of missed opportunities from which neither Burma nor Cambodia has fully recovered.

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