Chapter Six

CONCLUSIONS
Cambodian nationalism is not exclusively the product of the French rule. The love of freedom is embedded in the culture, history and, above all, the religion of the Cambodian society. This rather dormant national trait was kindled and invigorated by centuries of conflict with her aggressive neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam. The ever-increasing realization of the material weakness of Cambodia compared with her strong adversaries coupled with the urge to safeguard the national independence and territorial integrity impelled the Cambodian kings, Ang-Duong and Norodom, to seek the protection of any strong power - not exclusively France - that could assure national freedom. Although French imperialism, broadly speaking, assured the territorial integrity of its protectorate, denied it at the same time national freedom. It was this denial of freedom coupled with the impact of modern ideas of equality and national self-determination, that produced a more significant form of nationalism in the Cambodian mind. Moreover, the ninety and odd years of French colonial rule seems to be a passing phase in Cambodian history against the background of the long period of struggle with Thailand and Vietnam. When the French left Cambodia finally in 1954, the old aggressive manifestations of
her neighbours in the eastern and western borders have been renewed. In the context of the present Cold War, this involved a sinister threat to Cambodia's self-preservation. It is the urge to defend her national independence that has impelled Cambodia to declare her "neutralism" and seek an international guarantee of her neutralism as a means of dissociating herself from external entanglements.

Another point to which attention should be drawn is the leadership and the "class" from which it was drawn. The usual division of the society based on the economic status into the upper, middle and lower classes, with an exaggerated emphasis on the role of the "middle" class, seems to be alien to Cambodian experience. For the type of the middle class, the product of certain economic forces at work in 19th century Europe, is practically absent here. A more realistic approach to the classification of the Cambodian nationalist leadership would then be (i) the traditionalist leadership, and (ii) a newly-born progressive and reformist leadership. Both these categories were equally influenced, to a very large extent, by western education, civilization and institutions. In the early phase of the Cambodian nationalist struggle the progressives seemed to lead. But, in fact, their ideas and methods did not influence the general mass of the Cambodians. The traditionalists, on the contrary, concentrated their attention on the essential objective of ridding the country of foreign domination, leaving other matters almost untouched. This method of progress step by step with an eye on the preservation of the main features of Cambodian society and institutions proved more successful than the approach of the reformists.
We may try to explain the different types of Cambodian leadership on the basis of differences in economic and social status. But it was, broadly speaking, the mental make-up of the individual leaders that influenced them to be either a conservative, a moderate, or a radical. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain how members of the royal family like Prince Si Vatha and Prince Chantaraingsey joined the nationalist rebels, and Prince Youthevong subscribed totally to modern democratic and liberal political philosophy. Nor is it easy to explain why the Cambodians of humble parentage like Penn Nouth and Khim Tit joined the ranks of the Conservatives led by the royal family. Moreover, the leadership of the nationalist revolt by the docile-looking Cambodian bonzes like Achar Assoa, Achar Léak and Achar Hem Chieu reinforces our point of view.

Yet another significant feature in the Cambodian freedom struggle is the leadership of the King. But, one rather intriguing aspect is the respective roles of King (now Prince) Sihanouk and Son Ngoc Thanh. Son Ngoc Thanh is a man drawn from the class of intellectuals of the Cambodian society. His arresting personality, his organizational abilities and his captivating oratorical capabilities are rare gifts with which nature has endowed him. His patriotism is an incontrovertible fact, and like Nehru, Sukarno, Ho Chi Minh and U Nu he staked everything in the freedom struggle. With all these qualities, however, he was able to appeal and attract the attention only of the intellectual élite. He could not influence the mass mind to the same extent as Sihanouk could do. As regards his positive
Contribution to the nationalist movement it cannot be denied that if not directly — indirectly, he certainly accelerated the whole process of winning independence by goading the Conservative nationalists to quicker and more direct action.

Unlike Son Ngoc Thanh, King Sihanouk could influence and appeal to the mass mind by virtue of his position as king, his forceful personality and devotion to the welfare of the common man. Being a king, he had the responsibility of safeguarding the Throne and the good of his people. It was this twin loyalty that impelled him to follow a rather go-slow policy towards French colonial rule. Of course, he was not as successful as Thanh in attracting the intellectual élite towards his views and policies. However, his alertness to political realities and resilience to adapt himself as the situation warranted took the wind out of the sails of his opponents. By these qualities he was able to influence many intellectuals with his views and methods. Their loyalty and assistance were great assets to him in winning freedom ultimately. Moreover, it was largely due to his stewardship of the movement that Cambodia escaped the misfortune of the heavy loss of human and material resources which is usually noticeable in similar movements in Asia and Africa in recent times.