Chapter Two

THE COURSE OF THE MOVEMENT FROM THE ARREST OF SON NGOC THANH TO THE RISE OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY
The Nature of Cambodian Nationalism

Cambodian nationalism, as we have seen, made some headway during the period of Japanese occupation. It was, however, too weakly organised and too narrowly based to be able to consolidate its gains. When, in September 1945, the French returned to the country, Cambodian nationalism was still far from being a united, cohesive force. Broadly speaking, three types of nationalist opinion and action began to develop in this period based either on ideological differences or on sheer personal loyalties. There were, in the first place, the Conservatives, a group built around the royal family, the aristocracy and other vested interests, which had a traditional stake in the preservation of the existing socio-economic structure of the country. There were indeed a few exceptions. Prince Youthevong and Prince Norodom Phurissara, for example, were strongly democratic in their political outlook — the former was the founder of the Democratic Party. Another Prince, Norodom Chantaraingsey, a great grand-son of King Norodom, went even a step further: he embraced the Issarak ideology. By and large, however, the members of the royal family were in favour of the Conservative
section of Cambodian nationalists. The Conservatives, in general, were prepared to trim their patriotism to suit their particular interests. Thus, they were even prepared in 1945 to welcome the colonial power if that would help to sustain their time-honoured status and privileges. It would, however, be rash to conclude from this premise that conservatives were not genuine nationalists. What is, in fact, implied is that the attitude of the conservative nationalists, ably supported by the royal family, was inevitably influenced by what may be termed as the principle of self-preservation. They feared that a sudden rupture with colonialism might upset their power and status either by the internal or external forces. So they were prepared to go slow in the attainment of independence.

The other two, viz. the Moderate and Radical nationalist sections, drawn largely from the younger generation of Cambodian intellectuals and private or public employees, were more progressive and strongly anti-French in their outlook. The Moderate section, which spearheaded the movement during this period (1945-9), was represented by such leaders as Son Ngoc Thanh, Pach Chhoeun, Ioe-Koeus, Yem Sambaur, and others. This section was strongly nationalistic without having a Marxist orientation. Again, it was not *ipso facto* anti-monarchical in its political leanings. However, even if there was any such tendency, it was not due to its hostility towards the institution of monarchy as such, but to the irritation caused by the monarch's apparent alignment with the colonial power. Since its main objective was the attainment of complete political independence for Cambodia, it was prepared to adopt any means,
constitutional or otherwise, that was appropriate to the circumstances. This aspect explains to a considerable extent the see-saw attitude of the Moderates in the nationalist movement. For example, the Khmer Issarak movement, a somewhat militant branch of the Moderate section, accused the monarch of being too servile to the French. With a view to regaining independence soon, it went so far as to join hands with the Vietminh. But when it found later on that the Vietminh, instead of giving it material aid, was trying to dominate and engulf the movement itself, it joined the supporters of King Sihanouk, who in the meanwhile had succeeded in gaining a large measure of political autonomy for the country.

Lastly, there was the anti-monarchical and anti-French Radical section of nationalists, known in Cambodia as the Khmer Vietminh, which was largely inspired by Marxist ideology and dominated by the Vietminh. Nationalists like Keo Meas and Sieu Heng belonged to this category. In the early phase of the nationalist movement the role of the radical nationalists, when compared to the Conservatives and Moderates, was rather negligible. However, after 1949, it seemed almost to threaten the very bases of Cambodia's traditions and its life as a nation. The presence of this section was indirectly responsible for the Moderates joining hands with the Conservatives. And as the nationalist movement progressed King Sihanouk, the leader of the Conservatives, was able to use the existence of the Radicals as a bargaining counter to extract total independence from France.
The Arrest of Son Ngoc Thanh

On the eve of the return of the victorious Allied Forces the star of the Moderates, symbolized in the person of Son Ngoc Thanh, was in the ascendant. Conversely, the Conservative cause appeared to be in jeopardy. The prospects of an easy return of the French to Cambodia also seemed rather gloomy.

Son Ngoc Thanh and his Moderate group of nationalists were determined to resist the reimposition of French colonialism in Cambodia. The Royal Government headed by Thanh made it clear in a proclamation on 6 September 1945 that beyond normal courtesies to the French on an individual-to-individual basis, "there does not exist any political relations between France and Cambodia." (1) On the other hand, however, the incoming Allied Occupation forces under the command of Lt. Col. Murray, a British army officer, were greeted as "liberators." (2) Lest any agitation on the part of the Cambodians might be misunderstood by them as pro-Japanese manifestations, the people, particularly the residents of Phnom Penh, were repeatedly urged to remain calm and facilitate their free entry. It was felt that by maintaining such a disciplined attitude and through hard work

(1) Cambodge (Phnom Penh), 7 September 1945. (emphasis in the original) The Royal Government declared as "baseless" a Radio Paris report that Thanh had agreed to the re-establishment of French Protectorate in Cambodia. See Ibid., 15 October 1945.

(2) Ibid., 28 September 1945. The Allied Forces were entering Cambodia with the mission of disarming, as elsewhere, the Japanese forces; of releasing the French nationals interned by the Japanese; and of restoring peace and order in the country.

Son Ngoc Thanh, along with his Cabinet ministers, paid a personal visit to the Hôtel du Gouvernement to extend a warm welcome to the Commander of the Allied Forces.
individual Cambodians could help save the country's independence from the imminent threat of French colonialism. Meanwhile, Son Ngoc Thanh, with a view to impress upon the Allied Forces the Cambodian's strong desire for national independence as also to consolidate his own position, organised a plebiscite on 12 September 1945 which by an "unanimous vote" decided in favour of the country's immediate independence. (3) Also, at a ceremony organised by his associates, important Cambodian dignatories like Cabinet ministers and Mandarins swore "to make all sacrifices, including our lives, for defending the Monarchy and the Independence of Cambodia." (4)

While these manifestations of the "firm desire" to safeguard the country's independence were praiseworthy, the material resources at Thanh's disposal were not equal to the difficult task on hand. He could count on the support of a force of about three thousand volunteers in addition to the "secret police" organised by him. As obviously this was not enough, he proceeded to avail himself of the support of the Vietnamese resident in Cambodia, whose compatriots were also engaged in fighting the same enemy as Cambodia. It may be noted that the Vietnamese bias of Thanh was not a matter of expediency dictated by the force of circumstances. He had, on the contrary, been advocating Cambodia-Vietnam collaboration from 1938, in which year, under his initiative, a youth organisation, the Yuvasala, had been


(4) Cambodge, 13 September 1945. The ceremony was attended by King Sihanouk, Prince Monireth and other members of the royal family.
started with the explicit purpose of fostering fraternal relations between the two traditionally hostile nations. (5) Ever since he became Foreign Minister, and later on Prime Minister, he had been exhorting the Cambodians to collaborate "sincerely and fraternally" with the Vietnamese. (6) He even recognized the communist-oriented Vietminh, permitted the installation of a branch of it in Phnom Penh, and the hoisting of the Vietminh republican flag with the hope of obtaining its support to liberate Cambodia.

The necessity and desirability of associating the Vietnamese in Cambodia's freedom struggle did not carry conviction with a sizable segment of the Cambodian educated and intellectual élite. The Conservatives, for reasons to be explained later, were not comfortable with Thanh's honeymooning with the Vietminh. Even his colleagues in the Cabinet, notably, Khim Tit, Defence Minister, Nhiek Tiou Long, Minister for National Education, and Sum Hieng, Minister of Interior, were not prepared to support him in this regard. There was, moreover, a fear in the royal family circles that the growing influence of Son Ngoc Thanh

(5) In 1938 Son Ngoc Thanh founded the Yuvasala when he was working in the Royal Library, Phnom Penh. Membership for this youth organisation was open to all without distinction of sex, social status, or educational qualifications; the only qualification necessary was that the prospective member must be an energetic youth. All discussion of a political nature was forbidden. In its place, the Yuvasala encouraged social gatherings and camps such as those organised by it at Angkor, Kep, Hatien, and Saigon. With the outbreak of the last war the organisation went into the background. See Ibid., 21 August 1945.

(6) Ibid., 4 September 1945. In fact, there were repeated calls for such a collaboration. See Ibid., 1 September 1945 and 19 September 1945.
might upset their own power and position in the country. Therefore, it was felt necessary to remove Thanh from the political scene as quickly as possible. M. Khim Tit visited Saigon personally and requested the return of the French colonial power to quell the "unrest" in his country, which the latter willingly did. On 15 October Son Ngoc Thanh was requested to visit the Hôtel du Gouvernement, the temporary headquarters of the Allied Command on the pretext of discussing with the Allied Commander certain aspects of disarming the Japanese forces. On his arrival, he was arrested by the French and was deported to Saigon as a prisoner on the ground that his "intrigues" were "hurtful to the security of the Allied troops and detrimental to the interests of Cambodia." (7) Deprived of their leader and lacking in adequate material resources, Thanh's supporters could not organize an effective popular front against the French. (8) A considerable number of them fled either to Thailand or Vietnam.

The 'Modus Vivendi' of 1946

With the arrest of Thanh and the flight of his followers to neighbouring countries, the conservative cause became triumphant, and anti-French reaction in the country almost disappeared at least for the time being. King Sihanouk, who

(7) Communiqué of the Allied Commander in Phnom Penh. Ibid., 18-19 October 1945.

(8) Explaining the reasons for the absence of any overt popular reaction to the arrest of Son Ngoc Thanh, one of his closest associates, pointed out in an interview to the present writer in Phnom Penh that (a) the French forces had already occupied "all" the territory of Cambodia; (b) the Cambodian people as well as political leaders believed that the victorious Allied forces would not allow the French to come back; and (c) the leaders thought that if there was disorder it might be interpreted as complicity with the Japanese forces.
was away on a pilgrimage to Vihea-Suor. returned to the Capital a day after the arrest of his Prime Minister. Till his return he appeared to have been in favour of immediate independence for his country. When, for example, the French sent feelers to Cambodia for a negotiated settlement of Franco-Cambodian relations on a new footing on 28 September 1945 he wrote to Commander Gallois, the French representative in Cambodia, ostensibly under pressure from Thanh, that Cambodia would be prepared to negotiate with France in case the Cambodian delegation to such a conference was recognized as "delegates of an independent country." The Cambodian Government, he added, would negotiate with Admiral d'Argenlieu, the French High Commissioner in Indochina, treaties affecting the political, economic, cultural relations between the two countries on the condition that the negotiations were not of a nature affecting Cambodia's independence. (9) However, hardly a few weeks after the arrest of Son Ngoc Thanh he declared his loyalty to the French in the same way as he did a few months earlier to the Japanese.

What were the factors responsible for the royalist somersault? Were not the Conservatives in favour of Cambodia's independence? A student interested in the comparative study of nationalisms of Southeast Asia will be struck by the unique step taken by the defence minister Khim Tit in requesting the return of the French power. However, when they reaffirmed their loyalty to the French they argued that they were forced by certain "practical reasons."

(9) Sam Sary, *La Grande Figure de Norodom Sihanouk* (Phnom Penh, 1955) 7.
In the first place, King Sihanouk, the spokesman of the Conservatives, was of the view that the independence granted by the Japanese so abruptly suffered from a basic "legal weakness." He questioned the very legality of her independence in the absence of a formal recognition of her sovereignty by the Tokyo Government. (10) The second reason was that despite the French colonial rule of over eighty years the country was suffering badly from a lack of educated, technical and professional personnel. (11) The dearth of talent was further heightened by the sudden disappearance of the French officials during the Japanese occupation. (12) In these circumstances, it was argued, a sudden withdrawal of the French power would leave a big administrative vacuum which might paralyze even normal administrative functions. Besides, it was felt that the recovery of the Western provinces of Cambodia, viz., Battambang, Sisophon and parts of Siem reap, which were forcibly taken away by Thailand in 1941, would be possible with French aid alone. Far more potent than these was the fear — not unfounded in the light of Cambodia's history — of an independent and resurgent Vietnam seeking to reassert its authority over


(11) All the specialists in Cambodia were foreigners; there was practically no Cambodian specialist. The Cambodian students were deprived of specialized studies for want of encouragement and financial support. See Le Democrat (Phnom Penh), 5 August 1946.

(12) La Liberté (Phnom Penh), 2 March 1949.
relatively weak Cambodia. Indeed, during the period of Japanese occupation, the King had been urging his people under duress "to love their neighbourş as brothers." (13) But the basic hostility towards them continued as before. (14) Moreover, there was the more immediate, and for King Sihanouk a far more personally repugnant, likelihood of republican ideas percolating from Vietnam into Cambodia endangering the monarchy. The forced abdication of Emperor Bao Dai by the communist-oriented Vietminh in favour of a republic was fresh in his mind. Son Ngoc Thanh, as noted earlier, had been in close association with Vietnam and the Vietminh. Even after his removal from the political scene, his influence on a section of the politically-conscious Cambodians was not negligible. As if to confirm the suspicions of the King and the Conservatives, some of the anti-French hot-heads in Cambodia were accusing the monarch as "pro-French and as a traitor to the Nation." Worse still, anti-monarchical tracts (though issued on the spur of the moment) demanding the monarch's abdication so that "a republic may be established to save the country" from French colonialism, were being distributed by some of the followers of Thanh, notably Pach Chhoeun and Achar Duong. (15)

(13) Cambodge, 29 March 1945.

(14) It may be noted that when there was a move to unite the three Ky's in 1945 under the newly independent Vietnam the King pointed out that "Cambodia cannot remain indifferent to such an important change of status of a territory over which it wished to uphold its rights." Ibid., 27 June 1945.

(15) Norodom Sihanouk, "Le Cambodge Deviendra-t-il une Republique?" Réalités cambodiennes (Phnom Penh) 22 August 1959.
In these circumstances two courses of action were open to King Sihanouk: he could either openly declare his hostility to the French and join the other nationalists, or turn a reactionary and align himself with the colonial power. In either case his position and power would have been clearly in jeopardy. For if he completely sided with the people's will it was uncertain how political developments might, in the long run, affect the position of the Cambodian monarchy in view of the rise of centrifugal forces in the country. What had happened to Bao Dai might also happen to him. Moreover, the French as King-Makers were powerful enough to force his abdication in an attempt to perpetuate their authority over Cambodia. If, on the contrary, he followed the second course he would have earned the epithet of a "traitor" and the monarchy would have been equally endangered. Thus he could follow neither course. Inevitably, therefore, he had to follow the middle-of-the-road policy by which he could rally the country's nationalist forces to his side without losing the protective shield of France. Thus, while expressing his pleasure at the "resumption of traditional friendship" with France, he informed his subjects, at the same time, that France had given him the assurance of maintaining a liberal and sympathetic attitude towards the national aspirations of the Cambodians. (16) He was bold enough to declare that "there is no popular sympathy in the country for Francophobes." (17) Even more emphatic was

the statement of Defence Minister Khim Tit. He said that "in her own interest Cambodia has to collaborate with the French," but, it shall be, he assured his compatriots, "a true collaboration large, sincere and confiding." (18)

Two days after the arrest of Son Ngoc Thanh, a conservative-led government headed by Prince Sisowath Monireth, uncle of King Sihanouk, was formed with the purpose of negotiating with France. The new cabinet was composed of the following members:

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
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<tr>
<td>Prince Sisowath Monireth</td>
<td>Prime Minister, Minister for Interior and National Defence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prince Sisowath Monivong</td>
<td>Minister for External Affairs</td>
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<td>Chan Nak</td>
<td>Minister for Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sum Hieng</td>
<td>Minister for Culture, Religious Education and Fine Arts</td>
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<td>Khim Tit</td>
<td>Minister for Health, Public Works and Communications</td>
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<td>Var Kamal</td>
<td>Minister for National Economy</td>
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<td>Nhiek Tiou Long</td>
<td>Minister for Finance</td>
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For various reasons, France, on her part, was compelled to negotiate with Cambodia. First of all, the French war-record had been damaging to the interests of both the Indochinese and the Allies. It was her inability through military weakness to defend Indochina, during the war that had not only facilitated the drive of Japan towards Indonesia, Singapore, Malaya and Burma, but had also made Indochina an appendage of Japan. Even though the French had fought back, in the words of de Gaulle, with "a broken sword or a borrowed one," still French prestige

(18) A signed statement of Khim Tit. See Cambodge, 22 October 1945.

(19) Ibid., 18-19 October 1945.
in the estimation of the Asians as well as the Allied Powers was at the lowest ebb. France was conscious of the fact. Moreover, the years following the Japanese surrender were not encouraging for an easy return to Indochina. For the division of Indochina at the 16th Parallel for purposes of Allied occupation complicated the situation, especially in the north of the Parallel, where Nationalist China was encouraging the Vietnamese nationalists against France. Besides, the lack of facilities for the transport of French soldiers to Indochina left a time-gap which was profitably utilized by the nationalists to consolidate their position as far as possible. There was also a reasonable fear of American "designs" on Indochina for strategic purposes. (20) In France itself the socialists and communists were pressing their government for withdrawal from Indochina.

In spite of the difficult problems involved in the re-establishment of French rule in Indochina, the French colonialists were determined to perpetuate their colonial domination. The retention of colonies was felt as an urgent necessity in order not only to rehabilitate France's greatly damaged economy but also to satisfy her Great-Power complex. (21) But the political

(20) In fact, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had suggested an International Trusteeship for Indochina with the aim of eventual grant of independence. See The Memoirs of Cordell Hull, 2 (London, 1948) 1595-6.

(21) So unbending was the French desire to retain a hold on the colonies that George Bidault, the Foreign Minister, told the Consultative Assembly that: "We are prepared to collaborate with all, but we shall give up no territory. . . . The fact remains that France was, is, and will be a great power, her greatness consisting at once in greatness of mind and strength." New York Times, 28 March 1945.
climate as it existed in Indochina was not helpful for the restoration of French pre-war position. The nationalist upsurge, one of the fruits of Japanese occupation, proved to be a formidable obstacle. In Vietnam especially the nationalists under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh had already established a sovereign republic and were preparing to resist the impending return of the French power. Under these conditions, France's withdrawal from Indochina might spell the ruin of her colonial edifice as a whole. (22)

France became conscious of her military and economic weakness, and of the growing militant nationalism in Indochina as well. Therefore, she tried to apply "political weapons," i.e., lure the nationalists back into the French fold by appealing to their sentiment. For example, General de Gaulle had sent a message from the "mother country to the Indochinese Union" expressing France's "joy, solicitude and gratitude" for Indochina's "loyalty to France and resistance to Japan." (23) Andre Giacobbi, the colonial minister, came out with a political plan on 25 March 1945 which envisaged an Indochinese Federation composed of the five constituent units, namely, Cambodia, Laos, Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. Under the presidency of a Governor-General, a Council of State comprising representatives of Indochinese nationalities and French representatives was to be formed with powers to make laws and regulations affecting

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(22) Already the Neo Dastour Party in Tunisia, under the leadership of Bourguiba, and the United National Front in Algeria, were agitating for independence inspired by the Arab League. Ibid., 25 December 1945. See also Herbert Butterfield and others, A Short History of France, From Early Times to 1952 (Cambridge, 1959) 213-4.

the whole Federation. The Assembly (the composition of which was not defined) would vote all taxes and expenses. To this Assembly commercial treaties and other matters involving relations with neighbour-states would be submitted for discussion. Each of the constituent parts would have its own administration, and an Assembly elected in the way best suited to its own traditions and cultural level. Liberty of press, of association, and fullest respect for the cultural traits were assured. The entire Indochinese Federation would form a part of the proposed French Union. (24)

Cambodia alone, despite outward hostility, presented the prospect of reaching a quick and easy understanding. King Sihanouk's expressions of loyalty and Khim Tit's request for the return of the French sufficiently restored confidence in the latter to win over Cambodia to her side. The last push towards negotiations was made when the Southeast Asia Command gave notice on 3 January 1946 of its withdrawal from Indochina leaving the responsibility on France. (25) The Modus Vivendi signed on 7 January 1946, between Prince Sisowath Monireth representing Cambodia and M. Allessandri representing France, was thus the offspring of a 'mariage de convenance'. However, because of the hurry with which the document was drafted and also because of its "provisional character," the Franco-Cambodian treaty terms were expressed in vague terms. Besides,

(24) Ibid., 25 March 1945. See also Keesings Contemporary Archives, 1943-46 (London) 7138A.
neither the Indochinese Federation nor the French Union had come into existence when the document was signed. (26)

The Moderate nationalists were disappointed with the agreement. The resurrection of the French power in this guise caused in them considerable frustration. King Sihanouk, on the other hand, condemned their frustration. He said the idea of complete independence, at the moment, was "ridiculous."

Stating the reason he pointed out:

No one is more desirous of complete independence from France than I, but we must look facts in the face. . . . We are a small power of 3,000,000 people sandwiched between 20,000,000 Annamese and 12,000,000 Siamese. (27)

Among the moderates, some did not appreciate the King's reasoning. This reaction manifested itself in two forms: one section of the Moderates taking to constitutional methods to drive away the French, while the other section, which joined the Khmer Issarak, taking to arms to liberate the country.

The Khmer Issarak, or Free Cambodia Movement

Origin and Development

The Khmer Issarak, or Free Cambodia, movement, was started in Bangkok by a retired Cambodian official, Pock Khun, with the object of regaining Cambodian independence. (28) He found a

(26) A detailed discussion on the working of the Modus Vivendi is attempted in the next chapter.


ready recruiting ground for partisans in the area between Battambang and Kralanh, to the northeast of Siem réap, then under Thai occupation. Besides this, every high-handed action of the French officials indirectly assisted him in securing adherents to the movement. The bad treatment accorded to Achar Hem Chieou in 1942, as well as the "arbitrary arrest" of the nationalist Pach Chhoeun, drove a good number of bonzes into the Issarak fold. In 1945 a considerable number of the followers of Son Ngoc Thanh went to join the organisation when their leader was arrested, while some others fled to Cochinchina to lead the independence struggle from there. After the signature of the Modus Vivendi (1946), which had definitely re-established the French power in Cambodia, a few more were added to it. "It is this famous Modus Vivendi," observes Pann Jung, President of the Cambodian delegation and Counsellor of the French Union at Versailles, "criticised so much, which has increased the importance of the movement." (29) Some Vietnamese and Japanese, who stayed behind in Cambodia after their country's surrender to the Allied forces, reinforced the movement. (30) The Issarakas, among whom there were Cambodian women too, consisted in 1945 of about three thousand "good, honest people."

The movement could not perhaps have gained in strength and in importance but for the strong support of the Thai anti-French intelligentsia (31), and the irridentists who wanted to

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use the Issaraks as their cat's-paw. (32) The Issaraks were unmindful of this so long as they were free to organize and lead the nationalist agitation with their base in Thailand. With the help of the quasi-official recognition given to the movement by Pridi Banomyong's Free Thai Government (which came into power in 1944) the Issarak leaders were able to collect funds and publish a newspaper in Bangkok to propagate their nationalist views. (33) They were also able to purchase weapons of war in Thailand to supplement those manufactured by them independently in the jungle arsenals. (34)

The Issaraks after their training in jungle warfare broke into a number of small bands of 60 to 80 each. While some of

(32) That Thailand cast covetous eyes on Cambodian territory can be seen from the statement of Luang Vichitr Vadhakarn, a member of the Thai Council of Ministers in 1941. He said: "Angkor Wat is the flag towards which my desires are directed. . . . If we had secured Angkor Wat, it would have been tantamount to regaining the whole nation." Prajamitra, 5 April 1941. Quoted from K. P. Landon, "Thailand's Quarrel with France in Perspective," Far Eastern Quarterly, 1 (November 1941) 41.

(33) Thompson and Adloff, Minority Problems, 174.

(34) In this connection Pach Chhoeun informed the present writer as follows: When Pach Chhoeun was Minister for National Economy in Son Ngoc Thanh's cabinet he sent Pann Jung, who became later a Democrat, to Bangkok after the collapse of the Japanese power, to enter into an agreement with the Siamese government for the purchase of arms and ammunition to resist the re-entry of the French on Cambodian soil. In the meantime, the French entered Cambodia. But the purchase deal was continued and the arms obtained were employed by the Issarak leaders to attack the French in 1946.

According to an account given in La Liberté, among the weapons surrendered by the Issaraks to the Royal Government, there were also some local made weapons, a few Japanese made cartridges and English made hand-grenades. See La Liberté, 17 June 1947.
these small bands withdrew into the thick forests of Phnom Koulen, to the north of Siem reap, others established guerrilla bases in the Cardamom and Elephant mountain ranges to the southeast of Cambodia. (35)

Its Activities

By the end of 1945 the Issaraks were raiding sporadically the border areas of Cambodia and were disturbing the peace of the countryside. These raids evidently did not, at the moment, constitute an imminent danger to the French authority in Cambodia. But the first blow and perhaps the most serious of all subsequent attacks, was aimed at the Grand Hotel, the French official-cum-recreational centre in Siem reap, on the morning of 7 April 1946. On that day about three hundred well-armed Issaraks "after a long premeditation and under the initiative of responsible authorities" (36) (in which Governor Ouk Lonn of Siem reap was implicated), attacked the Hotel, killed seven French officers and claimed to have captured the "entire stock of arms" from the French there. Order was restored in the evening with the help of reinforcements rushed to the trouble-spot and a visit of Prime Minister Prince Monireth. (37) A few days later another attack was made on the frontier-post of Puok; later on the targets of attack were


(36) Cambodge, 9 August 1946.

(37) King Sihanouk had sent a protest to d'Argenlieu, French High Commissioner for Indochina, against the Thai-aided attack on Siem reap. See Ibid., 23 August 1946.
the posts of Tasing, Phnom Dek, and others. (38) From this time onwards such attacks became a regular feature, but they were by no means of a decisive character. In Phnom Penh itself (39), and in Kompong Thom, to the north of the Capital, there were "outbreaks" against the French aided by Cambodian troops drafted into the French colonial forces and "some Japanese who were hiding in Cambodia." (40)

The main objective of rebel activity was to harass the French forces by surprise attacks, and deny the enemy of an easy passage by destroying the communications and facilities for securing food and other material. The Francophils became the targets of Issarak hatred and persecution. For example, in Keiy-Pucy, a pro-catholic village about 8 Km. to the south of Battambang, more than a hundred inhabitants fell victims to the Issarak sword. At the same time, however, an American pastor, Reverend Ellison, who was arrested by mistake was released. (41)

(38) Ibid., 12 August 1946.

(39) According to W. G. Burchett in Cambodia itself, after the reimposition of French colonialism, the Khmer Freedom Front, Nekhum Issarak Khmer, was organised with the support of civil servants, workers and students. See W. G. Burchett, Mekong Upstream (Hanoi, 1957) 111.


According to W. G. Burchett after the defeat of Japan, some of the Japanese stayed behind in Cambodia and started a secret organization called the Black Dragon Society. For details see W. G. Burchett, Mekong Upstream, 119-21.

(41) Sud-Mekong (Phnom Penh), 15 December 1946.

According to M. Penavaire, French Commissioner in Cambodia, Reverend Ellison was killed by the Issarak. See Cambodge, 23 November 1946. It appears to the writer that M. Penavaire might have believed that the arrest must have resulted in the pastor's sure death. Sud-Mekong, quoted above, which gave out the details a month later, stated that the pastor was released.
Occasionally, the rebels raided the local offices (salakhums), burnt the civil and tax-registers, and informed the inhabitants of the place "sarcastically" that the Issarak Government had exempted them from all taxes. (42)

These acts of organized sabotage, though directed primarily against French colonialism, could not but affect the otherwise placid life of the Cambodian peasant. Even though the movement was started with utmost patriotic motives, with the passage of time some fugitives from law and some others who were actuated by motives of personal gain came to join the movement. "Incontestably," observes La Liberté, "this corps of élite [i.e., Issarak] was not constituted of the fine flower of honest people." (43) Therefore, the border-line between the well-meaning and patriotic Issarakks and self-seekers could not be drawn with any precision. With the passage of time the acts of sabotage grew so notorious that the Issarak movement as a whole tended to appear as "an immense organization of brigandage which day by day is gaining in importance." (44) The insurrectionist activity produced insecurity in the countryside and hindered the normal agricultural pursuits. The peasants were therefore forced to abandon their homes and fields to protect their own lives. (45) As a result agricultural production declined so

(42) La Liberté, 22 March 1947.
(43) Ibid., 19 February 1947; also see Ibid., 8 January 1947.
(44) Ibid., 19 April 1947.
(45) Ibid., 22 March 1947.
much that the country was brought to the verge of famine. Business was similarly affected — the most affected community being the Chinese. Whereas in early 1947 the economic condition was "fairly complicated," by the end of the same year it grew to be "extremely hard."

The Rise of Political Parties

Unlike the Issaraks, the constitutionalist section of the Moderate nationalists preferred, in spite of their strong anti-French feelings, a non-violent constitutional approach to regain national freedom. This peaceful course seemed to be appropriate in view of the average Cambodian's dislike for violence, his aversion to revolutionary doctrines, and his loyalty to the throne. Moreover, the constitutionalists had neither a well-knit nationalist organization like those organized in Vietnam, Indonesia and Burma, nor the wherewithal to resist the French power. They were thus compelled to manoeuvre within the resources available in the country which inevitably led them to follow a rather cautious policy as regards French colonialism. Under these conditions, the assurance of the King to grant a constitution was very welcome to them.

The grant of freedom of speech and association as well as the proclamation of the Electoral Law in May 1946 brought on to the political arena several political parties sponsored both by the Conservatives and the Moderates. Two of them, namely, the Liberal Party and the Progressive-Democratic Party, were organised by the Conservatives, while the Democratic Party was organized
by the Moderats. (46) All the parties were led by princes of royal blood, all of them shared the fear of the neighbouring countries, and all professed loyalty to the monarchy. A brief mention is made here about the policies and programmes of the various political parties, particularly in regard to their attitude to French rule.

The Democratic Party (Krom Prachathipatay) organised under the inspiring leadership of Prince Youthevong — a French educated Doctor of Science with socialist leanings — was composed largely of Cambodian intelligentsia, professional élite and, particularly, a good number of the erstwhile partisans of Son Ngoc Thanh. The party, while expressing its "filial and absolute" loyalty to the monarch, advocated a constitutional monarchical system of government with a popularly elected assembly having legislative and deliberative powers. It also stood for the formation of a government by majority; and economic, intellectual and moral amelioration of Cambodians. As regards its policy towards France it was strongly anti-colonialist and hostile to the concept of the Indochinese Federation. However, it was favourably disposed towards the French Union if it was based on a footing of equality and liberty. This party as compared to the others was better organised.

The Liberal Party (Kana Seri Phean), first known as the Constitutionalist Party, had the "good-will of the King." It was formed by Prince Norindeth (who had "cordial relations"

(46) A fourth party was also contemplated, but it did not see the light of the day because of certain differences between its leaders, Khim Tit and Nhiek Tiou-Long.
with the French military circles), Son Voensai, and a few others. It was an organisation, in the main, of Cambodian bourgeoisie such as land-owners, Sino-Cambodian businessmen, top-ranking officials and bonzes. It advocated respect for human rights, of person and property, creation of professional trade unions, and, in particular, right to vote for the bonzes. As regards its relations with France it stated that it would strive to develop such conditions as would help to foster a better understanding and sincere friendship between the Cambodians and the French. (47)

The Progressive-Democratic Party (Krom Chamroeun Chbet Khmer), which went out of the political scene after the 1946 elections, was formed by Prince Norodom Montana. The party was composed of a group of retired officials and businessmen who were drawn towards it more by their personal relations with the leader than by political convictions. Unlike the Democratic party, it believed in the progressive evolution of Cambodia towards democracy "in collaboration with the French administration." Its belief in progressive evolution was due to its conviction that the average Cambodian was considerably backward in the art of democracy. The party members would act as "sincere, intelligent guides" to make the Cambodian fit for democracy. (48) Its slogan was: "Democratise the Cambodian community."

(47) For full programme of this party see Discours Prononcé par le Chef du Parti Liberal le 2 juin 1946 à l'Ocassion de la Creation de ce Groupement (Phnom Penh, 1946).

(48) Le Progrès (Phnom Penh), 16 August. Only three issues of this paper are available.
The Democratic Party Comes to Power

Ever since the formation of the political parties Cambodian nationalism assumed a two-fold aspect. It was, at one and the same time, a domestic struggle for power between the various political parties and a movement against French colonialism. However, in so far as the fight against French rule is concerned, it was the Democratic Party that was always at the vanguard. There was, therefore, a constant strife between the Democrats and the French rulers.

The Democrats suffered no delusion as regards the motives of French colonial rule in Cambodia, even though they claimed themselves to be the "sincere servants of France," and their party as the "only" instrument for closer Franco-Cambodian collaboration. (49) They knew that France would not voluntarily relinquish her hold over Cambodia. They also knew that without Cambodia and other colonies France could not continue to claim Great-Power status in the world councils. (50) They regretted Cambodia's political and economic bondage to France. If the country had been free from colonial control they could have set the house in order without let or hindrance by ordering first things first. (51) However, accepting the situation as it

(49) Le Democrat, 5 September 1946.
(50) Ibid., 18 September 1947.
(51) Le Democrat stated that if Cambodia had been free from French control she could have, first of all, drafted a constitution, then formed a government and fixed her relations with France and, finally, worked for the return of the lost provinces. But the events did not happen as the Cambodians had expected for they were imposed on them by France. Le Democrat, 27 November 1946.
existed, they worked for national liberation, appealing, at the same time, to France's good-will to realize Cambodia's national aspirations. "We ask you," Son Sann, Minister for Finance in the Youthevong Cabinet, appealed, "to understand our profound aspirations and assist us in realizing them." (52)

The French authorities in Cambodia did not conceal their hostility towards the Democratic Party. Sometimes in league with the Conservatives, sometimes on their own initiative, they tried to place various obstacles in its way. Even before the national elections of 1946 attempts were made to discourage the civil servants, who formed the "quasi-totality" of Cambodian élite, from taking part in politics. The civil servants were required to retire or resign their jobs if they desired to participate in the elections. In the absence of such restrictions, the French argued, there would ensue a "rush" into politics which would paralyse normal administrative functions. (53) The French perhaps were right. But the Democrats, who counted largely on the open support of the civil servants for their success, disagreed with what they called as the "ridiculous conditions." Le Democrate, the organ of the Democratic Party, commented: "To deny its confidence in the Cambodian élite is to abandon the people to their pitiable fate; is to refuse an opportunity to serve the grandeur of the King; and is to fetter the country's autonomy." (54) The Democrats won the...

(52) Son Sann's interview to a French journalist quoted in Ibid., 13 November 1947.
(53) Cambodge, 27 June 1946.
(54) Le Democrate, 29 August 1946.
At the time of elections also there were complaints that hardly a few weeks or days were allowed for the candidates to choose their constituencies, to submit their candidature to the Ministry of Interior, etc. (56) If the people had to participate in the elections with calm and dignity, Le Democrat asked, why all these hurdles were placed on the way? (57)

An insight into the nature of French hostility towards the Democratic Party and of its Government can be had from the famous "Black Star" ("Etiole Noire") incident which occurred in February 1947. Although a detailed account of the incident is not available, still the framework is clear. According to M. Sim Var, one of the victims of this incident, "the colonialists have concocted against our Democratic Party and the Royal Government a story of all varieties of treason, by adopting the most barbarous methods of coercion and pressure worthy of totalitarians." (58). About fifteen members of the Democratic Party, including Hem Chamroeun, Chief Secretary to the Cambodian Prime Minister, and Sim Var, a deputy in the National Assembly, who were alleged to be the former members of the secret police of Son Ngoc Thanh were arrested on the ground (55) As a result of these protests the Cambodian Ministry of Information in a communique stated that except for monks, officers, sub-officers and soldiers of the National Guard, all were eligible to participate in the elections. Ibid., 24 June 1946.

(56) Ibid., 24 June 1946.

(57) Ibid.

of their "having relations with the Khmer Issarak rebel movement." (59) The accused were deported to Saigon and were detained there without trial for about nine months, i.e., till November 1947, when they were brought back to Cambodia and kept under house arrest in Kompong Cham. (60) The arrest and detention of Sim Var particularly was done in disregard of the parliamentary immunity he enjoyed as a deputy. The detenus were finally set free in June 1948 after "repeated protests" from King Sihanouk. After his release Sim Var was designated by the Cambodian National Assembly to represent Cambodia at the French Union in France. This representation was resented by the French in Cambodia, and a formal protest was lodged with the Royal Government to the effect that his nomination would constitute a "grave provocation." Recounting this incident Sim Var commented later that such was the way the French representatives in Cambodia violated with impunity the democratic liberties. (61)

The Work of the Democratic Government

Despite the hostility of the French and the scepticism of the Conservatives, the Democrats won an almost incredible victory in the elections for the Consultative Assembly in September 1946, thanks to the unstinted support of the civil

(59) Evolution de la Politique, 11.

(60) Cambodge, 22 March 1948.

servants and other sympathisers. (62) The normal process of Democratic government, however, was hindered because of the presence of the French authority. After the elections it took nearly four months to form a party government. In normal practice the old cabinet should have given place to the new one, no matter whoever became the head of the new government. But it did not happen. On the contrary, it needed the "aid and impartiality" of the French Commissioner and the so-called "intrigues" of the Democrats, to resolve the "ministerial crisis." (63) In any case, Prime Minister Prince Monireth relinquished his office on 5 December 1946 in favour of Prince Youthevong, the leader of the Democratic Party. The new Cabinet was composed of twelve ministers and secretaries of state of whom ten were members or sympathisers of the Democratic Party.

The Drafting of the Constitution

The Youthevong cabinet soon after its formation proceeded to tackle some of the serious problems like finance and insecurity confronting the country, indeed, without much success. The government, however, showed keen interest in reforming the Cambodian institutions, particularly in shaping constitutional structure of the country. According to M. Lacharriere, "in reforming the Cambodian institutions, it is the Democratic Party

(62) National elections to the Consultative Assembly were held on 1 September 1946. The following are the party-wise election results: Democratic Party: 50; Liberal Party: 14; Independents: 3; and Progressive Democratic Party: Nil.

(63) The present writer tried in vain to find out the reasons for the "crisis." Le Democrat, the organ of the Democratic Party, was proscribed at this time — the first of the many such proscriptions.
which has played a predominant role." (64) The Constitution itself was "to a very great extent its work." While drafting the constitution Youthevong government had totally disregarded the reminders of the King that the Consultative Assembly was not a constituent assembly and that its task was simply to give an "opinion" regarding the shape of the proposed constitution. (65) The fruit of the efforts of the government was the liberal constitution that was proclaimed by the King on 7 May 1947.

King Sihanouk was not happy about the liberal constitution forced out of his hands. His aim in agreeing to grant a constitution was, as suggested by Le Thanh Khoi, to regain his waning prestige and influence owing to his abrupt renewal of loyalty to the French, and to rally around himself as much of popular support as possible to combat the Issaraks. (66) In his heart of hearts, therefore, the King was not in favour of a liberal constitution for his country. According to him, perhaps rightly, the establishment of full-fledged democratic set-up of government in Cambodia, which was still in colonial bondage and where the level of education was far too low, was like putting the cart before the horse. In an address delivered to the Cairo University on 14 November 1959 he said: "With regard to my country, we had first of all to put-back the 'horse' i.e. independence and national education before the 'cart' 

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(64) Rene de Lacharrière, "Le Cambodge dans l'Union française," Politique Étrangère (Paris), 3 (June 1948) 257.

(65) Cambodia, 21-22 October 1946.

The proper course, according to him, should have been first the attainment of independence and secondly a "substantial development" of popular education before introducing democracy. But at the time of proclaiming the constitution he was afraid that any resistance on his part would have been "misunderstood" by his people. For the same reason he even had to disregard the friendly counsels and protests of some of his well-wishers.

In any event, the Constitution, briefly, provided for almost all the paraphernalia of a modern democratic political system. Civil liberties were provided for all; and political rights were recognized for all except Buddhist monks, women, soldiers on active list. The Constitution provided for a bicameral legislature, namely, the National Assembly and the Council of the Kingdom, whose duration was fixed at four years unless otherwise dissolved. In addition to these, there was also a third body, the Council of the Crown, whose duty was to nominate a new King in the event of the throne falling vacant either due to the death or abdication of the ruling monarch. Collective responsibility of the Cabinet was recognized. Cabinet ministers could also be chosen from outside the members of the National Assembly.

Cambodia Commentary (Phnom Penh), 3 (1 December 1959) 9.

Ibid., 8.

Lacharrièrè, "Le Cambodge dans l'Union française," 256.

The French, according to Allen B. Cole, assisted the Cambodians in drafting the constitution in order to (i) mollify critical world opinion, and (ii) to make the Cambodian monarchy and its relations with France more acceptable to the people in view of the growing strength of nationalism within the country. See Allen B. Cole, ed., Conflict in Indochina and International Repercussions: A Documentary History, 1945-55 (Ithaca, New York) 1956) 3.
However, Cambodia's freedom of action was circumscribed because of the presence of French domination. The preamble of the constitution bound Cambodia to the yet-to-be-born Indochinese Federation and the French Union. Article 45, by implication, negatived Cambodia's freedom to negotiate and conclude treaties with any other country except those in the Indochinese Federation or the French Union. Further, the provision in the same article, providing for the appointment of persons entrusted with diplomatic assignments, was a misnomer because even the 1949 agreements, as we shall see later, did not allow Cambodia to send her envoys to other countries except with prior agreement with France. Despite the liberal nature of the constitution, the Cambodian government had to function within the fold of the Modus Vivendi.

The Issarak Submissions

We have seen elsewhere in this chapter the state of insecurity in the countryside brought about by the Issarak resistance to the French. The Democrat-led government was concerned with this problem. Thonn Ouk, a Democrat, wrote:

The important question now . . . is to bring into national fold the Issaraks who truly love Cambodia by avoiding all misunderstanding, so that union might be reestablished in peace and tranquility, which is all the more indispensable as our country is just now left with very few means of recovering from the difficult situation in which the war has placed us. (70)

Unfortunately, however, the Government was inadequately equipped with the necessary materials to combat the insecurity. The

(70) Le Democrat, 30 October 1946.
native army was too short of arms and ammunition, and trained personnel. The French were reluctant to supply arms and ammunition to the native army lest they may be turned against the French themselves. As for the trained men, according to M. Sonn Voensai, Cambodian Defence Minister, it would take a "long-time" before they could be available for regular duty. Moreover, the French army command in Cambodia used the effective forces of the Cambodian National Guard for guarding the frontier posts. This was, in fact, the duty of the French army and of the mobile reserves of the Cambodian army. (71) It is not surprising therefore that in the circumstances the Government was rendered "ineffective" vis-à-vis the Issarak bands. There was however one weapon that could be employed with profit. That was appeal to the patriotic sentiments of the Issarakas asking them to return to the national fold in the name of peace and security.

From the middle of 1947 the surrender of the Issarakas to the Royal Government became a regular feature. The submissions of the Issarakas were due to the overall malaise in their organisation and functioning. In the first place they relied too much on external aid, namely, Thailand. The Thai aid was the result of their anti-French feelings, and not the result of a love towards the nationalist aspirations of the Issarakas.

(71) A statement of Sonn Voensai. See Cambodge, 11 January 1947. La Liberté suggested that the federal forces should be sent to the frontier posts such as Pailin, Boviong, etc., while the Cambodian national forces should be used for pacification purposes. See La Liberté, 14 May 1947.
Thus so long as the Pridi's Free Thai Government was in power the Issarak cause was well served. The Issaraks were able even to organise a "Free Cambodian Government" in Bangkok. But when the Pridi Government was ousted from power by a coup d'etat and especially when the pro-western and pro-French Pibul Songkrom came to power in April 1948, the fate of the Issarak movement's base in Thailand was sealed. Houl, the head of the "Free Cambodian Government", himself was arrested on a flimsy charge of having illegally sold an automobile. (72) Resulting from this honey-moon with the Thais, the Issaraks became suspect in the estimation of average the Cambodian as having extra-national affiliations. Secondly, the leaders of the movement were by no means an experienced lot. Thirdly, there were too many Issarak organisations. Any one who could command some amount of influence in a particular area could start a movement of his own. Naturally, therefore, there was no coordination of policy, tactics and strategy. Lastly, for reasons stated earlier, the Issaraks had earned "a tinge of banditry." "They acted more and more like war-lords exacting tribute from the population in the form of 'voluntary' contributions, and raiding truck conveys and railroads." (73)

It was under these circumstances that a good number of Issaraks, disillusioned as they were, started paying heed to the royal government proclamations of amnesty. According to

(72) Thompson and Adloff, Minority Problems, 174.

(73) David J. Steinberg, Cambodia: its people its society its culture (New Haven, 1957) 105.
a report of the Cambodian Ministry of Information the total number of submissions by May 1947 was about 3,135, of whom there were a considerable number of women Issaraks. (74) The highest number of submissions were reported from Battambang. La Liberté commented: "Like the prodigal son our Issaraks are returning to the sheep-fold. One can even say that they are rushing to get back." (75)

However, the province of Siem râp stood on a different footing. It was the "only" province that chose to plough a lonely furrow. The Issaraks continued their anti-French activities; there were reports of their "strongly armed" clashes with the French. (76) The elections of December 1947 for the National Assembly could not be held in the province of Siem râp (it had 5 seats) because "the state of insecurity" did not "permit at the present moment voting operations." (77) There were still a good number of Issaraks and their leaders such as Prince Chantaraingsey and Dap Chhnort who refused to pay heed to the appeals of the royal government. They continued to engage themselves in anti-French activities. They would not submit until the country's independence was achieved. They joined hands with the Vietminh with the hope of achieving national freedom.

(74) In Kompong-Chhanang for example out of 281 Issaraks who submitted to the Government, 102 were women. Cambodge, 3 July 1947.
(76) Cambodge, 4 November 1947.
(77) Ibid., 18 December 1947.
The Democratic Party suffered a serious blow on account of the premature death of Prince Youthevong on 18 July 1947 at the age of thirty-four. (78) His death was a relief to both King Sihanouk, who is said to have been "afraid" of the Prince, and the French. Prince Watchayavong, an independent, was chosen to head the new Government. Some of the important cabinet posts were given to members belonging to parties other than the Democratic Party. The post of the Minister of Interior, for example, was given to Au Chheun, a Progressive-Democrat. He in his turn replaced Yem Sambaur (a Democrat), the head of the National Police, with an independent Sok Phat, Governor of Kompong Chhanang. These changes, it may be noted, did not go without "strong protests of the Democrats over whom the King had to impose his will." (79)

French colonialism had manoeuvred to remove from the Cambodian political scene all those like Son Ngoc Thanh, Pach Chhoeun and Prince Youthevong, who were positive enemies of its authority. It had, for all practical purposes, come to terms with the Conservative group of nationalists. It took advantage of the inter-party strife to employ the traditional divide-and-rule policy. Nevertheless, there were certain basic limitations

(78) It is held in certain quarters that Prince Youthevong did not die a natural death. It is alleged that when he was laid up with tuberculosis some "deadly poison" was injected into his body which caused his death. See W. G. Burchett, Mekong Upstream, 111-12. See also M. Lautissier's speech in the French Union Assembly debate on 14 April 1949. France, Annales de l'Assemblée de l'Union Française, Débats, 1 (1949) 481-2.

(79) Evolution de la Politique, 11-12.
on Cambodia's freedom of action which touched every Cambodian at every point. So the agitation for freedom continued leading eventually to the Franco-Cambodian agreements of 1949.