Chapter Three

LIMITATIONS ON CAMBODIA’S AUTONOMY AND THE EVENTS LEADING TO THE 1949 AGREEMENTS
Franco-Cambodian relations between 1946 and 1949 were governed by the hastily-drafted Modus Vivendi Agreement of 1946 and a few Conventions signed thereafter, and two more French-created institutions, namely, the Indochinese Federation and the French Union. Whatever the French intentions were in creating the French Union, the Conservatives and the Royal Government headed by the Democrats—the latter under the initiative of King Sihanouk—agreed in November 1947 to adhere to the Union. (1) Cambodia was the first among the Indochinese states to join the Union. Princess Ping Peang Yukanthor of the royal family was chosen as vice-president of this organization. (2) The Cambodian leaders were also given some opportunity of attending various international organisations, notably the UNESCO and UNO. (3)

(1) The main reason, as stated by Democratic Prime Minister Chhean-Vam, for Cambodia's adhesion to the French Union was to protect the Kingdom against external danger. He pointed out, as King Sihanouk had done earlier, that Cambodia being poor, both economically and as regards population, needed external aid. The French Union, the prime minister considered, would act as a "secure and durable bastion" against external enemies. See Cambodge, 26 July 1948.

(2) It may be noted that the French had been trying to use Cambodia as a show-piece to attract the recalcitrant nationalists of other parts of Indochina into the French colonial community. "Cambodia should serve," said Maurice Moutet, the French Minister for Colonies, "as an example to other peoples in Indochina." Quoted from New York Times, 31 December 1946.

(3) Besides this, Cambodian representatives also participated
Cambodia in the Indochinese Federation

However, the enforced membership in the Indochinese Federation that affected seriously Cambodia's interests and her autonomy. From the point of view of Cambodian interests, the federation was in no way better than the former Indochinese Union. The machinery of this federation, significantly, was neither representative of the Indochinese, including the Cambodians, nor of their interests. It was all dominated by the French or the pro-French elements. The head of the federation, the French High Commissioner, was responsible to none in Indochina, but to the Metropolitan government. He wielded enormous power and influence in the administration of Indochina. He assumed unilaterally the role of the "best arbiter" in resolving the disputes arising between the federal units. In a sixty-member Assembly of States of the Federation a pro-French majority was kept up by devising an intricate mechanism of selecting the members. (4)

The administration of defence, foreign policy and diplomatic relations were kept exclusively under French control. France

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in the Washington Conference regarding the return of the Cambodian provinces from Thailand in 1946. A Cambodian delegate Son Sann participated in the work of the ECAFE at Lake Success. See Cambodge, 15 September 1947 and 4 September 1947.

(4) The composition of the Indochinese Federation was decided at the Dalat Conference convened on 1 August 1946. The representation of members was as follows: Cambodia and Laos ten each; the traditional divisions of Vietnam, viz., Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, ten each; the remaining ten for the French interests. See Ellen J. Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina (Stanford, Calif., 1954) 161.
retained in her hands both the right of establishing land, naval, and air bases and also the right of free movement of her as well as her colonial forces in the whole of Indochina. The rest of the subjects were divided into General Subjects and Local Subjects. General Subjects, which included finance, customs, treasury, posts and telegraphs, railways, federal judiciary, secondary and higher education, federal police, were placed in charge of the French High Commissioner, and by delegation to his Commissioner in Cambodia. Local Subjects such as general administration, Cambodian police, social welfare, public works, agriculture, forests, public health, and fine arts, were to be administered by Cambodia with the help of French advisers and experts. (5)

In the administration of the General Subjects the federal government encroached substantially on Cambodian autonomy. The federal government showed very little regard for the views and interests of the federal units (the terminology itself is a misnomer) in the formulation and execution of federal laws, customs, and others. It was enough if a particular measure helped in the promotion of French interests. As regards Cambodia, in the first instance, she was drawn into the federation by the unilateral decision of France. Similarly, the French authorities made a treaty with the Chinese government in respect of Chinese immigration into Cambodia. Even financial decisions were taken

(5) Full text of the document is available in Roger Lévy, Indochine et ses Traites (Paris, 1947) 41-6.
sometimes arbitrarily with little regard for the possible adverse effects on Cambodia's slender financial resources. (6)

Cambodia's freedom of action was more seriously affected in the judicial and economic spheres. Owing to the extra-territorial jurisdiction enjoyed by the French, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Laotians, these nationals came exclusively under the legislative and judicial control of France. In consequence, whenever the Cambodian parliament passed a legislative measure applicable normally to all the people residing within the territorial limits of Cambodia, the native government had to undertake "laborious" negotiations with the French Commissioner to induce him to adopt such a law. (7) They were therefore not amenable to local laws and regulations. The Cambodian feeling in this regard was very bitter because of the fact that almost the total economic and commercial life of the country was controlled by the French, Chinese and Vietnamese. "The King of Cambodia," observed a prominent Cambodian nationalist, "is the King not of Cambodia, but of Cambodians." (8)

As against this the French argument was that since Cambodia had no systematic judicial and commercial laws and regulations, jurisprudence and experienced lawyers, it would be fatal to leave foreign nationals and their economic interests under Cambodian

(6) For example, an ordinance of High Commissioner Thierry d'Argenlieu aiming at increasing the salaries of officials with retrospective effect, costing the Cambodian exchequer of about 35 million piastres, was passed without consulting the Cambodian government. See La Liberté, 21 June 1947.

(7) Sok Chhong's speech in the French Union Assembly debate on 14 April 1949. See France, Annales de l'Assemblée de l'Union Française, Débats, 1 (1949) 471.

(8) Ibid., 472.
control. It was further argued that such a prospect would render foreign investments shy in entering Cambodia. (9) While it is partly true that Cambodia was lacking in well-defined laws and regulations, it is open to serious doubt if the investor with so much of protection given to him was really helping Cambodia's economic development, or simply using the French administration's protection to fill his own pocket.

Even though Cambodia was regularly maintaining a surplus of exportable products like rice, maize and dry fish, she could not derive even reasonable benefit out of it. For, since her export products had to pass only through Saigon, they inevitably fell into the hands of about a dozen firms located in Saigon which decided the prices of goods. French business houses in Saigon, it may be noted, controlled about 75 per cent of the total Cambodian imports and about 50 per cent of the total exports, i.e., imports worth 600 million francs and exports worth 500 million francs. In addition to this, her membership in the Customs Union, and the favourable treatment of the French towards Cochinchina in regard to the imported goods, affected the prospects of Cambodia's economic betterment. (10)

Moreover, the French rubber companies, notably the Compagnie du Cambodge et Terre Rouges, Société indochinoise des Plantations, and Compagnie du Coutchoucs du Mekong, made the

(9) La Liberté, 19 November 1947. The same arguments were advanced even after the signing of the 1949 agreements. See La Lettre et L'Esprit des Accords France-Khmers (Phnom Penh, 1953) 30-1.

(10) La Liberté, 9 February 1948.
most "scandalous" profits at the expense of the indigenous natural resources and the labouring class. In 1939, for example, these companies were reported to have amassed a total profit of 309 million francs compared with an amount of 35 to 40 million francs distributed as wages to the labourers in the plantations. (11) Again, the staggering rise in the profits made by the Compagnie du Cambodge, as reflected in the increase from 44,689,000 francs to 259,283,000 francs made in 1947 and 1948 respectively, cannot be attributed wholly to the changes in prices or utilisation of resources. (12) Besides, the Bank of Indochina, which exercised control over Indochina's finance, is said to have made huge profits by wise investments mainly in the French-owned or directed companies and in various international business concerns. It is estimated that within a period of eight years (1936-43) it made a profit of 480 millions. (13)

While, in this way, the natural and other resources of Cambodia were exploited by the French business and other concerns, neither the country as a whole nor the Cambodian who sweated on the plantations and elsewhere did benefit from these profits. On the contrary, it had only helped to serve,


(12) Ibid.

(13) The Bank of Indochina had business connections with such international business concerns as the Bank of Paris and Netherlands, Le Comptoir national d'escompte and, above all, the French-American Banking Corporation in New York. Further, the Bank is said to have had about 535 shares in the Credit colonial. See for details Ibid.
as stated by *La Liberté*, the interests of a "financial pool" whose "greediness is legendary in Indochina." (14) As a result, the economic progress of Cambodia was throttled thereby leaving the average Cambodian as poor as ever. M. Son Sann, an expert on Cambodian economy, wryly observed: "Cambodia is rich, but the Cambodians are poor." (15)

**Limitations on Local Autonomy**

As regards the administration of the Local Subjects, the *Modus Vivendi* was supposed to have conceded a good measure of autonomy to Cambodia. However, under the façade of autonomy the French officials were given very extensive powers (euphemistically called "advisory") which, in effect, embraced almost every sphere of Cambodian governmental activity. The *Modus Vivendi* created four categories of French officials; viz., the Commissioner, advisers to the Cambodian ministers, advisers to the Cambodian regional heads, and experts or technicians. None of them was under the control of the Cambodian government in any way. Whereas the last three categories of officials were answerable only to the Commissioner in Cambodia, the latter himself was responsible to the French High Commissioner at Dalat in south Vietnam.

The French Commissioner, who wielded very extensive powers, overshadowed almost totally the Cambodian king in authority. In addition to safeguarding the interests of the

foreigners including the French, he controlled the French armed forces and maintained public order in Cambodia. He was empowered to supervise and advise the Cambodian ministers and high officials in the internal administration. He was, in his own right, the King's personal adviser. He had ready access to the sessions of the Cambodian council of ministers. Above all, no law and regulatory texts, no proclamations and circulars, not even their interpretation were to be made without the express consent of the Commissioner. In essence, he exercised in all these matters the "veritable right of veto." Likewise, the regional French enjoyed advisers and advisers attached to the Cambodian ministers in their respective jurisdictions the same rights and powers as the French Commissioner. (16) In the administrative and technical departments each Cambodian departmental head had at least one French technical adviser or expert.

The complicated mechanism created by this modus vivendi might have worked smoothly if the French had shown good-will and sympathy, or had, at least, defined the respective jurisdictions clearly. Unfortunately, however, in theory as well as in practice ambiguity remained the key-note of the Franco-Cambodian relations. Writing in 1948 M. Lachérière observed that the division of powers as between the Indochinese Federation and the French Union on the one hand, and Cambodia

(16) The Modus Vivendi provided for ten advisers for seven Cambodian ministers. The following were the new territorial divisions as envisaged in the document: (1) Kampot and Takeo; (2) Kandal and Kompong Speu; (3) Kompong Chhnang and Pursat; (4) Siem rāp and Kompong Thom; (5) Prey Veng and Svay Rieng; (6) Stung Treng, Kratie and Kompong Cham. See Roger Lévy, Indochine et ses Traites, 43.
on the other, remained "obscure." Even the Conventions that were signed later on did not attempt to clear the mist of ambiguity; — "l'ensemble reste provisoire et un peu emperique". (17)

Indeed, M. Emile Bollaert, the French High Commissioner, while defining the French Indochina policy, stated in September 1947 that France had undertaken to demarcate and respect the respective jurisdictions of the states composing the federation. He declared:

> Each Indochinese people, in conformity with its own genius, would define for itself its conditions of existence. It would organise, all by itself, its representative institutions, judiciary, finance, education . . . hospitals without the least interference from France. (18)

For obvious reasons this well-intentioned declaration could not be translated into practice. They served, in effect, no other purpose than to present "an idealistic rationalization of the French position." (19) This vagueness in jurisdictions continued to remain as it was naturally advantageous for the interests of France.

Yet another hindrance to Cambodian autonomy was the French dogmatic belief that Indochina was one well-integrated unit. M. Bollaert, even as early as 1947 characterized the net-work of roads, railways, posts and telegraphs, etc., as "revealing the common interest." (20) The French indeed had been trying

(17) René Lacherière, "Le Cambodge dans l'Union Française," Politique Étrangère, 3 (June 1948) 257.


(19) Ibid., 59.

(20) Cambodge, 12 September 1947.
in vain for nearly a century to fuse the different peoples of the peninsula into one unit. It is however an accepted historical fact that a few gadgets of modern civilisation like railways, posts and telegraphs by themselves could seldom forge disparate elements into one compact unit, especially those with a long history and tradition of their own. What is, in fact, essential is emotional integration and community of interests, which clearly enough were conspicuous by their absence. (21) Because of this imposed unity, the problems of Cambodia's economic and political freedom were inextricably tied up with the other states of Indochina. Cambodia had often been complaining that although her revenue contributions were "proportionately superior" to the rest of the states, her interests were "sacrificed" for the benefit of Vietnam and Laos. (22)

The Cambodian nationalists, while resenting the economic domination and political paternalism of the French, were happy to receive the assistance of their advisers and technicians. Unfortunately, however, these French personnel turned out to be more a hindrance rather than a help to Cambodia's freedom of

(21) *La Liberté* observed in this connection that the "desperate steps" taken by the French authorities to inculcate the federal spirit in the Indochinese people had tended to give "unforeseen and ludicrous results." See *La Liberté*, 9 July 1947.

(22) A French paper *Sud-Mekong* suggested the separation of the receipts and expenditure of each state in Indochina and also the appointment of a Cambodian delegate to look after the economic and other interests of Cambodia. See *Sud-Mekong*, 9 February 1947. Accordingly Nhiek-Tioulong, a former finance minister, was appointed as Cambodian delegate in 1948. See *Cambodge*, 22 March 1948.
action. This "hypertrophy of Counsellors," as a Cambodian nationalist had put it, became a sort of a stumbling-bloc to Cambodian initiative. (23) The technical advisers in general, went beyond their respective limits and formed "parallel services" to the national services. (24) The Modus Vivendi, M. Sok Chhong observed, "affected Cambodia's national aspirations, retarded the pace of her progress, and obstructed her blossoming as an independent state." (25) He even complained that the French authorities had tried to use the Modus Vivendi as a "convenient instrument" to return to the "direct administration over Cambodia." (26)

In spite of the French promises of liberalism, and expressions of good-will and respect for Cambodia's internal sovereignty, their policies and the system of government in Cambodia did not witness any perceptible change. Cambodia, in substance, obtained practically nothing to satisfy her national aspirations. As observed by Ellen J. Hammer: "Despite a somewhat wider participation in the administration of the country after 1945, the situation in Cambodia remained much the same as before the war." (27) Naturally, therefore, there existed an undercurrent of mutual suspicion, and even positive hatred towards the French. In order to get over this awkward situation both the

(23) La Liberté accused the French officials in Cambodia as being actuated by "overweening conceit." See La Liberté, 16 April 1947.


(26) Ibid.

Moderate-led governments and the Conservatives continued to pursue negotiations with France. They were keen on recasting the entire premise of Franco-Cambodian relations on a more firm and clear basis. However, the French colonial authorities, being rather deeply involved in Vietnam, could not devote their attention entirely to the Cambodian problem. Meanwhile, a sizable section of the Cambodian Issaraks began to move towards the Vietminh seeking aid and assistance against the French rule.

The Issarak Drift Towards the Vietminh

It may be recalled that after the arrest of Son Ngoc Thanh by the French authorities in October 1945, some of his followers fled to Bangkok to swell the ranks of the Khmer Issaraks. Some others crossed the frontier to Cochinchina to organize a resistance movement in close collaboration with the Vietminh there. The guiding factor in joining hands with the Vietminh was the patriotic motive of ridding the country of French colonialism rather than a belief in Marxian ideology.

To start with, however, the Cambodian nationalists did not seek the support of the Vietminh. On the contrary, it was the Vietminh agents who began to infiltrate into Cambodia in 1945. (28) The Vietminh motives in such a move were two-fold.

(28) In conformity with the communist tactics, the modus operandi of the Vietminh agents was first to cross the border in not more than six at a time. The next step was to attack and destroy the authority of the local Cambodian officials like those of the Khums. The last step was to install themselves, if possible with their families, at vantage points along the border in the southern parts of Cambodia. Prince Monireth, "Surface et Defence" in Réalités cambodgiennes, 5 February 1960.
The first motive was to deprive the French of communication lines and military bases in the rear so as to avoid "a decisive build-up of French forces in North Viet-Nam." (29) The second, and more important, motive was to keep the supply line open from Bangkok to Saigon along the Cambodian eastern frontier for the transport of medical and army equipment. In this task their Cambodian followers were used as their agents. (30) By the end of 1946 the Vietminh agents had thinly spread over the western and eastern parts of Cambodia, particularly in the Battambang region, the focal-point of Issarak activity.

On the Cambodian side, tendencies towards closer collaboration with the Vietminh developed only after the arrest of Son Ngoc Thanh. Among those few thousands who fled the country there were some Vietnamese and about 2,000 Cambodians belonging to the Japanese-sponsored Cambodian army. (31) M. Pach Chhoeun, leader of the 1942 demonstration, resigned from the cabinet the day after the arrest of his prime minister Son Ngoc Thanh, and withdrew to Cochinchina. His aim was to bring together all the anti-French elements gathered there and organise resistance to the French in cooperation with the Vietminh.

The activities of Pach Chhoeun, during the six months before his arrest by the French in April 1946, forms an interesting

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(30) Cambodge, 5 December 1947.
(31) According to Virginia Thompson this section of the army was called the "Green Shirts." The present writer is not aware of any such army except the "Heihos" organized by the Japanese. See Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, Minority Problems in Southeast Asia (Stanford, 1955) 175.
phase of the cooperation of the nationalist Cambodians with the Vietnamese, and in particular with the Vietminh. (32) Soon after his arrival in Cochin-China he met the Governor of Soctrong and also Nguyen van Tai, a well-known member of the Communist party and a member of the "Committee of the South" set up by the Vietminh organisation to rule Cochinchina. With their support he founded a Committee of Cambodian Resistance in Soctrong.

This committee, which, according to Pach Chhoeun, had a following of about 6,000, was headed by one M. Lam Em. Pach Chhoeun toured several provinces in Cochinchina such as Canto, Sadoc, etc., where he was accorded an uniformly enthusiastic welcome by the local population. Encouraged by the overwhelming response to his call for national service, he established at Triton the headquarters of the resistance organisation — the Committee for Independent Cambodia — of which he himself became the president. Its task, among others, was to draw, with the close cooperation of Republic of Vietnam, the "world's attention to the Cambodian independence movement." (33) Early in 1946 the French army attacked Chaudoc, an important Vietminh training centre. Pach Chhoeun escaped arrest. However, after agitating for a few months at a few places he finally surrendered to a French army officer on 6 April 1946 at Rachgia. He was later on tried and sent to France to join Son Ngoc Thanh.

The activities of the resistance organisation, from the time of the arrest of Pach Chhoeun till the coming of the

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(32) The information that follows is gathered by the present writer from Pach Chhoeun in January-February 1959 in Phnom Penh.

(33) A Vietminh Radio Report (Hanoi), 7 November 1946 quoted from Thompson and Adloff, Minority Problems, 175.
Issaraks exiles from Bangkok sometime in 1947 are not clearly known. Presumably the movement itself began to fizzle out for want of active Vietminh support. (34) At this juncture, the Issaraks from Bangkok came to "revitalize" the movement. In the meantime, the Vietminh, too, in its own interests, proceeded to unify and strengthen the Issarak movement. A joint plan of action was subsequently drafted, the execution of which was entrusted to Nguyen Thanh Son (alias Nguyen van Tai), a member of the Vietminh Executive Committee for Nam Bo in south Vietnam. The resistance leader of Siem reap, Captain Dap Chhuon, was chosen as the president of the newly organised "Committee for Khmer Liberation" as well as its military commander. He was entrusted with the task of "coordinating Issarak operations with the Vietminh's resistance to the French." (35) Dap Chhuon kept the areas of Battambang and Siem reap for his sphere of operation and control. And one Son Ngoc Minh, who posed as a brother of ex-prime minister Son Ngoc Thanh (36), was placed in charge of the southern parts of Cambodia. It may be noted that both Nguyen Than Son and Son Ngoc Minh were largely responsible for strengthening the position of the Vietminh in Cambodia. By the end of 1948, 

(34) M. Pach Chhoeun informed the author that the Vietminh response was "very cool" when he asked it for support to attack Phnom Penh in December 1945.

(35) Thompson and Adloff, Minority Problems, 175.

(36) Almost all the moderates and even the leftists in Cambodia deny that Son Ngoc Minh was a brother of Son Ngoc Thanh. They contend that it was a fake name designed by the Vietminh with a view to confusing the Cambodians and enlist their support by making use of Son Ngoc Thanh's name.

This information is based on the writer's interviews with various Cambodian political leaders.
however, almost the entire country became the arena of the Vietminh-Khmer Issarak activities. (37) In the southern and south-western parts, in particular, there were sporadic but formidable attacks on French military posts, and on local Cambodian officials who were suspected to be Francophils or supporters of the royal line of action. (38)

The Royal Government and the Issaraks

The growing drift of the Issaraks towards the Vietminh had obviously caused concern in the rank and file of the Conservative and Moderate-Constitutionalist sections of the nationalists. The French, who were mainly responsible for dealing with the Vietminh attacks on Cambodian territory, were not well-equipped. The French soldiers, who were hastily recruited by them for service in Indochina, were so badly trained and so poorly equipped that their performance was far from satisfactory. Moreover, as the Vietminh offensive grew more and more formidable in Vietnam itself, all available resources, including the

(37) The provinces which were affected were: Svay Rieng, Takeo, Kampot, Kompong Chhnang, Kompong Thom, Sisophon, Battambang, Siem reap, and Pursat, and the route between Stung Treng and Kratie in the east.

King Sihanouk, in a letter to the French Commissioner, pointed out that no part of the country was free from the Issarak-Vietminh trouble. See Sam Sary, Le Grande Figure de Norodom Sihanouk (Phnom Penh, 1955) 31.

(38) For example, Chin Eam, Chauvaysrok of Kompong Trach in Kampot province, was killed by the Vietminh army. See Cambodge, 4 January 1949. In Ponhea Lieang in Prey Veng province elections to the National Assembly were postponed because of the insecurity. Ibid., 14 June 1949.
Cambodian soldiers, were geared to fight the Vietminh there.

The royal government itself was grossly ill-equipped both in money and men to meet the situation single-handed. (39) Worse still, the "excessive deeds" of the French soldiers in subjecting Cambodian villages to indiscriminate attacks on the suspicion of their being Vietminh enclaves helped to provoke the rebels to further acts of violence. (40)

The gravity of the situation was high-lighted when an Issarak-Vietminh band attacked an auto-rail linking Battambang with Phnom Penh in broad daylight on 27 April 1948 which resulted in several casualties, including ten French lives. (41) The Royal Government as well as the National Assembly grew alarmed over the deteriorating conditions in the country. Immediately following this incident, the Cambodian parliament passed a resolution with an overwhelming majority directing the Government to obtain arms as quickly as possible "no matter from what country." (42) Premier Chhean-Vam hurried to France where he

(39) The royal government was suffering from chronic deficit in the national budget. For instance, the budget for the year 1949 had shown a deficit of 198,000,000 million piastres because, whereas the receipts were only 163,000,000 piastres, the expenditure was 361,000,000 piastres, "even after important deductions in the demands of the services." See Cambodge, 15 February 1949. The finance minister contemplated of appointing a commission, composed of members of parliament, functionaries, and representatives of professional organisations, to study the working of the national services and to suggest ways and means of effecting economy. Ibid.

(40) Statement of Meas Hell, leader of the Liberal Party, in the National Assembly. Ibid., 13 January 1949.

(41) Ibid., 29 April 1949.

(42) Le Democrat, 27 May 1948. See also Cambodge, 25 May 1948.
informed the French authorities, including President Vincent Auriol, about the nature of the insecurity in his country. Despite the French assurances of assistance nothing tangible seems to have come out of this visit. Therefore, although the prime minister tried with all available means to meet the situation, he was not even partially successful. And when he demanded the National Assembly for "full powers" to tackle the various problems including that of insecurity he was voted down. M. Penn Nouth succeeded to the office following the resignation of Chhean-Vam on 7 August 1948. He undertook to tackle the problem of insecurity within the shortest possible time, of course, with the assistance of the French authorities. He urged the French Commissioner, M. Laubet: "It is necessary and it is urgent to remedy the situation vigorously in order to prevent the morale of the people from being impaired; for otherwise the crisis that afflicts Cambodia would reach the most dangerous proportions." (43)

The successive royal governments did not, or rather could not, rely on military measures alone. On the contrary, they were issuing a series of amnesty proclamations asking the nationalist rebels to surrender to the government in the name of peace. Of these, the most significant was the proclamation issued jointly on 24 May 1948 by the National Assembly and the Royal Government headed by Penn Nouth. This proclamation, while accepting the fact that independence was the legitimate right of every nation, pointed out that for achieving national independence it was not necessary to resort to armed violence.

(43) Ibid., 18 August 1948.
against the French. It also pointed out that self-reliance, and not collaboration with outsiders (that is, the Vietminh), should be the basic aim of every Cambodian. Further, it rejected the Issarak view that armed violence against the French would assist the Government a good deal to press for the quick grant of independence. On the contrary, the proclamation stated, the state of insecurity would make it "extremely difficult" for the Government to negotiate with the French. (44) The Issarakas, however, were not convinced of this reasoning. They were prepared to fight till national independence was achieved. Truly, as observed by Meas Hell, "the cause of insecurity was due to the desire for independence." (45)

France Proclaims Cambodian Independence

Meanwhile, High Commissioner Bollaert signed on 5 June 1948 the Ha Long Bay Agreement with ex-Emperor Bao Dai recognizing the independence of Vietnam. Of all the treaties signed between France and Vietnam, this was the first in which France incorporated the word "independence" in the agreement. There was, however, no desire on her part to give meaning and substance to that noble word. In fact, her main aim in signing the agreement was to draw away the Vietnamese nationalists from Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh to the side of Bao Dai without, at the same time, having the need to give up her control over Vietnam. This subterfuge on

(44) Le Democrat, 27 May 1948.
(45) Cambodge, 13 January 1949.
the part of the French authorities, as is widely known, ultimately helped neither the French nor Bao Dai. On the contrary, it only helped to swell the ranks of the Vietminh. "Instead of rallying nationalists in the Viet Minh front to Bao Dai," observes Ellen J. Hammer, "the Ha Long Bay Agreement crystallized more support around Ho Chi Minh." (46)

Nationalist movements, in general, are partly influenced, and sometimes benefited, by certain external developments. As for Cambodia, the declaration, at least in principle, of Vietnam's independence introduced an element of urgency into the course of the nationalist movement. The Conservative and Constitutionalist-Moderates were forced into the defensive in the face of Issarak criticism. The Issaraks could now show the example of Vietnam to prove the correctness of their stand against the French rule. Consequently, they increased their pressure on France to extract the same concessions as were conceded to Vietnam. On 9 November 1948 King Sihanouk appealed to the French Commissioner: "If I have spoken of Independence, it is because I have the firm conviction that this word, with all that it implies, constitutes the key to the desirable solution of the problem." (47) He pointed out that if France failed to grant independence, the


The Ha Long Bay Agreement was not ratified by the French Parliament until 19 August 1948. The French had hoped that Bao Dai would not ask for more freedom than what they wished to concede. Bao Dai, however, would not return to his country unless a fair measure of independence was given to him without which it would be impossible for him to rally around him the Vietnamese nationalists. On 8 March 1949 Bao Dai and Vincent Auriol exchanged letters which conceded some measure of independence, but that was not at all sufficient to kill the Vietminh. See Ibid., 217 and 225-9.

(47) Sam Sary, Le Grande Figu, 17.
Cambodian throne as well as the welfare of his people would be in danger in the face of the growing volume of insurgent activities. Recognition of Cambodian independence, the King stressed, did not mean a complete break with France. On the contrary, he said, he could not "conceive of Cambodian independence without France and the French Union." (48) The Democratic Party, on its part, urged France to proclaim the Cambodian independence within the frame-work of the French Union. (49) On 28 November 1948, President Vincent Auriol declared: "The Government of France recognizes the independence of Cambodia, and this independence has no other limits than those flowing from her adhesion to the French Union." On 16 December 1948 the independence of Cambodia within the frame-work of the French Union was proclaimed in Phnom Penh. A few days later the Cambodian National Assembly changed the word "autonomy" into "independence" in the Constitution. (50) The actual treaty was signed on 8 November 1949 at the Elysée Palace in Paris.

King Sihanouk, armed with the proclamation of independence, which, as he stated, was only a "preface to its realization," undertook a tour of the rebel-infested provinces. He impressed upon the people the French promise of independence and urged them to give up violence and return to the national fold. "The road to independence," the King declared, "is now open to us. It is necessary for us to come together in order to remove from our

(48) Ibid., 18.
(49) Cambodge, 23 November 1948.
(50) Ibid., 29 December 1948.
path the germs of insecurity, pillage and death from which our peasants have already suffered enough." (51)

In the meantime, inter-party and personal strife began to grow in Cambodian politics. The Democratic Party itself was split into four groups: (i) the original Democratic Party, (ii) the National Reconstruction Party led by Yem Sambaur, (iii) the Victorious Northeast led by Bi Sam and Mean Chay and to some extent aided by Dap Chhuon, and (iv) the People's Party led by Sam Nhean. (52) Yem Sambaur, the leader of the National Reconstruction (Redressement National) party brought down the government of Penn Nouth on 20 January 1949 on charges of corruption, favouritism, etc. Although Yem Sambaur belonged to the minority party, King Sihanouk, impressed by his dynamic energy, patriotism and, above all, fearlessness, asked him to form the government. The King found his new prime minister a loyal friend and a right person to face the critical situation facing the country. The advent of Yem Sambaur to power opens a new phase, as we shall see in the chapter that follows, in the country's relations with France and in its internal politics.

The Issarak Submissions

For the moment, however, Yem Sambaur, encouraged by the French promise of freedom, issued a proclamation of amnesty to all the Issarakas. Those Issarakas who surrendered to the Royal Government before 13 April 1949, the proclamation read,

(51) Ibid., 22 December 1948.

(52) Ibid., 3 August 1951. See also Thompson and Adloff, Minority Problems, foot-note on 186.
would enjoy equally with other Cambodian citizens all the rights and duties as provided in the Constitution. (53) The Issarak too, in the meantime, were getting disillusioned as regards the Vietminh aid. Instead of giving the aid the Issarak needed, the Vietminh tried to use them for its own purposes and draw the Issarak movement itself into the Vietminh organization. This disillusionment coupled with the French promise of freedom and the royal government's assurance of amnesty, encouraged the Issarak to lay down their arms.

The Issarak, in fact, began to submit to the government from February 1949 onwards. In Kampot itself, it was reported, 3,500 Issarak submitted to the government. Most significant of all was the surrender of the Issarak leader Dap Chhuon to King Sihanouk on 1 October 1949 at Angkor Wat in Siem Reap with his followers who included a group of female auxiliaries. Dap Chhuon expressed his desire to serve the King and the Nation along with his followers. (54) Thereupon, he was made the commandant of the Corps Franc Kmer, or Cambodian Free Corps. With the submission of Dap Chhuon conditions of insecurity fast disappeared in the Siem Reap area. The convoy system which was in vogue for nearly three years was given up. A few more

(53) Cambodge, 14 March 1949.

(54) For one year before the date of his surrender the Royal Government had been in contact with Dap Chhuon. San Yun, Governor of Siem Reap and after the transfer of military command of Siem Reap and Kompong Thom to the native hands Commandant Sirik Matak, had several 'personal contacts' with Dap Chhuon. It was after the intervention of Yem Sambaur that he decided to surrender to the King. See Ibid., 3 October 1949 and La Liberté, 5 October 1949.
rebel leaders like Krou-Nhean and Krou Diem surrendered to the government along with their followers. (55)

There were, however, some Issarak leaders like Puth Chhay, Prince Chantaraingsey, Pok Khun, the founder of the Issarak movement, Keo Tak and Leav Keomoni, who ignored the amnesty proclamation. They continued their anti-French as well as anti-Vietminh struggle to regain full independence for the country.

The post-1949 period was the most critical period in Cambodia's struggle for freedom. The Franco-Cambodian treaty of 1949 and the Conventions signed in 1950, as we shall see, conceded only a little freedom for Cambodia. In general, the outcome of these agreements did not satisfy the Cambodian nationalists including King Sihanouk. In consequence, the post-1949 period witnessed certain important alignments in the nationalist ranks which greatly influenced the course of the movement. Of these, the first was the rise of Marxist-oriented and Vietminh-directed radicalism which seemed to threaten the very bases of Cambodian way of life and institutions, particularly the monarchy. The second was the return of ex-prime minister Son Ngoc Thanh to active politics. He rallied around him a sizable section of the Cambodian nationalists threatened to eclipse the King in popular estimation as an implacable enemy of French rule. The third

development was the chronic constitutional instability — a result of multiplicity of parties and groups. The powerful Democratic Party, in general, split itself into a few mutually-warring groups. One of these appreciated the royalist line of action and joined the ranks of the King and Conservatives forming what may be termed as the Royalist group. The remaining groups, despite their internal quarrels, stood for the defence of the Constitution, and opposed the King whenever he tried to overstep his constitutional limits. The friction between the King and the Parliament led finally to the dissolution of the latter. The inter-action of these developments led the King ultimately to assume personal rule and also leadership of the freedom struggle.