Chapter Four

EVENTS LEADING TO KING SIHANOUK'S LEADERSHIP OF THE MOVEMENT
An Appraisal of the Franco-Cambodian Agreements

The Franco-Cambodian treaties of 1949 and 1950 gave Cambodia the status of an independent state. She acquired complete authority relating to the Local Subjects like Local Budget, Press and Information, Labour Legislation, Tourist Office, etc. (1) She was no more fettered by the French-imposed advisers and experts in her internal administration.

She did not, however, gain the same measure of freedom as regards the administration of such important subjects like Finance, Equipment Plan, Foreign Trade, Customs, National Treasury, Posts and Telecommunications. The old Indochinese Federation which administered these subjects gave place to various inter-governmental bodies (as envisaged at the Pau Conference in 1950) to "study, coordinate and regulate" the policies of the Indochinese states in respect of these subjects. Cambodia was not free to make any policy decisions even in cases where her vital interests were involved. She could not, for instance, sign commercial treaties with foreign countries.

(1) The local subjects also included the Department of Registration of Stamps and Estates, Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient, Committee of Rice and Maize, Office of Rural Credit. See Sum-Hieng's Press Conference. Cambodge, 27 January 1951.
except with the prior approval of France (euphemistically called "the High Council of the French Union"), Vietnam and Laos. (2) The same rule held good for other subjects also. Cambodia's monetary and Customs policies were linked with those of Vietnam and Laos through the Monetary Union and the Customs Union (Art. 7 & 8). The Cambodian piastre was linked to the French franc.

Even though Cambodia was compelled to shape her economic and other policies in association with Vietnam, Laos and France, the latter herself was independent of any restrictions or obligations to Cambodia. She was not, for example, required to obtain the favourable opinion of Cambodia or of the High Council before concluding commercial treaties with foreign countries. (3) She could also devalue the Cambodian piastre after a nominal "consultation" with Cambodia as provided in the treaties, or even without doing so as was done in May 1953. (4)

(2) In all such cases the procedure was first of all to submit the treaty proposals to the Study Committee on Foreign Trade and later obtain the unanimous approval of the intergovernmental conference. See Livre Jaune sur les Revendications de l'Indépendance du Cambodge depuis le 5 Mars 1955 (Phnom Penh, 1955) 42. See also The Implementation of the Pact Agreements — Services Transferred to the Independent States of Indochina as of April 1, 1951 (Document No. 44 of 29 May 1951, Ambassade de France, New York).

(3) Livre Jaune, 1, 42.

(4) Ibid., 40. Regarding the strong protest of Cambodia, see Cambodge, 16 May 1953.

It is interesting to note here the French argument that if the French franc had not supported the Cambodian piastre, Cambodian finance could have suffered from "gigantic inflation and catastrophe." See La Lettre et l'Esprit des Accords Franco-Khmers (Phnom Penh, 1952) 42-3.

While this may be partly true, it is a moot point if the linking was done in the interests of Cambodia or of France. In this connection one may recall the traffic in piastres which became almost a regular business of many of the French officials in Indochina. See Ellen J. Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina (Stanford, 1954) 300.
As regards the administration of Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Relations, Judiciary and Defence, Cambodia gained practically no advantage. Cambodian foreign policy decisions were reserved to be made by the French Government. Her diplomatic personnel, chosen under French direction, were to receive letters of credence from the President of the French Republic. The Cambodian King had only to initial them (Art. 17). The officials so chosen were to discharge their duties under the "direction and control" of their French counterparts in foreign countries. Heads of foreign diplomatic missions to Cambodia were to be accredited to both the French President and the Cambodian King. (5)

In spite of these handicaps, Cambodia was permitted to join the World organizations like the UNESCO, WHO, etc. (6) The countries of the Western bloc recognized the "independence" of Cambodia and established diplomatic relations with her. It is interesting, however, to note that neither any country of the Communist bloc nor any Asian nation except Thailand chose to recognize this independence of Cambodia. (7) France, by this

(5) Even though however there was some relaxation in this regard in January 1951, previous consultation was made necessary for sending Cambodian diplomatic personnel abroad and receiving similar missions at home. La Lettre et l'Esprit, 18.

(6) Cambodia's application for membership of the UN, sponsored by France, was vetoed in the Security Council by the USSR. However, Ping Peang Yukanthor of the royal family attended the UN General Assembly session in 1951 as an "official observer." See Ibid., 20.

(7) For details as to the countries which recognized Cambodia, see Sam Sary and Mau Say, Bilan de l'Oeuvre de Norodom Sihanouk pendant le Mandat Royal de 1952 à 1955 (Phnom Penh, 1955) 106-7.
show of Cambodian independence, was able to assuage the critical world opinion, especially that of the USA. This made possible the free flow of US military aid to France which enabled her to continue her colonialist war in Indochina in the guise of fighting communism. The Communist bloc countries, on their part, began to aid the opponents of French colonialism in Indochina, particularly the Vietminh. In this way the Cambodian struggle for freedom was entangled in the world-wide Cold War struggle.

As for Judiciary, Cambodia, as before, had civil and penal jurisdiction over her citizens. Foreign nationals, including the Chinese, Vietnamese and Laotians, continued to remain under the jurisdiction of the mixed or joint courts over which the native government had little control. The Cambodian nationalists were prepared, in the circumstances, to admit extra-territorial rights to the French nationals, but not to the Chinese because of their strong economic hold over Cambodia. So when the 1949 agreements did not alter the position in relation to the Chinese, they evidently grew bitter about it. Prime Minister Yem Sambaur, for example, took it as "insult to a legal code of Cambodia recognized as one of the most humane in the world." (8) Inasmuch as the successive Cambodian governments refused to ratify these clauses, the judicial position remained the same as it was during the Protectorate period. (9)

(8) Quoted from Norman Lewis, Dragon Apparent (New York, 1951) 207-8.

The same differences of opinion affected the military clauses as well. Indeed, the treaty clauses provided for a nominal Cambodian army for purposes of maintaining peace and order in the country, and for the defence of the national frontiers against external aggression. In actual practice, however, the Cambodian army was kept under the control of the French army command on the ground of the state of war with the Vietminh. The Cambodian nationalists, including the King, were demanding the transfer of the command of the native army into Cambodian hands as also the withdrawal of the French forces to the specified garrisons and bases in the kingdom. In this way, they felt sure, the native army could assume a truly "national character" with which they hoped to check the anti-government propaganda of the nationalist rebels and deal effectively with the insurgency problem. (10) In support of their confidence in the native army they pointed to the two "autonomous" provinces of Kompong Thom and Siem reap (recently transferred to Cambodian control) where the ex-Issarak leader Dap Chhuon was maintaining peace and order. In other places where the French army was in control, they complained, "the country people were turning to communism" because of the French attacks on Cambodian villages "on the mere report that the Issarak had been seen there." (11)

(10) King Sihanouk's letter to the French Commissioner in Cambodia of 26 May 1949 in Sam Sary, Le Grande Figure de Norodom Sihanouk (Phnom Penh, 1955) 33-4.

(11) Prime Minister Yem Sambaur's interview with Norman Lewis. Norman Lewis, Dragon Apparent (New York, 1951) 208.
The French, on the other hand, contended that the Cambodian army was not capable of restoring peace in the country by itself. This was particularly so at a time when the country was faced with trouble from the Vietminh. It is to be noted that after the establishment of the communist rule in China in 1949 the French authorities tried to justify their continued stay in Indochina on the ground of fighting communism. What had until 1949 been just a colonial war, was transformed almost over-night into a fight against international communism! Alexander Werth observes:

The *Indochina* war, started by the French administration and the 'Saigon Clique' was a war of colonial reconquest, in which Bao Dai was to serve as a screen of respectability, had now become in official propaganda part of the Free World's struggle against World Communism. (12)

High Commissioner Pignon wrote to King Sihanouk: "Your Majesty would understand without any doubt that it shall be dangerous to reduce the role and importance of the French or mixed forces so long as the Kingdom has to combat the Vietminh invasion." (13)

The real reasons, however, were different. The French authorities were apprehensive of giving modern weapons to Cambodians because, as General des Essars, the French General in Cambodia, said, "if they had anything worth taking they would


M. Jean Letourneau, French Overseas Minister and a member of the MRP, declared that if France withdrew her forces from Indochina, the latter would face the threat of seizure by "other forces." See *New York Times*, 10 April 1950.
clear off — *ils foutraient le camp.*" (14) Moreover, whereas the Cambodian government was confident about the *bona fides* and patriotism of Dap Chhoun, des Essars considered him to be a "bandit" and wondered, according to Norman Lewis, "how long it would be before he had to send the planes to Siem-Réap." (15) The French authorities even alleged that the Cambodian political leaders were so power-thirsty that they would use the native forces to serve their own personal ends. Summing up the French suspicion and distrust of the Cambodians, the *New York Times* correspondent wrote:

> On their part the French, inclined to feel that Cambodian nationalists are over-confident about the capacity of purely Cambodian efforts to cope with the pacification problem, cite the tendency of Cambodian political leaders to use military units as instruments of personal power as a disturbing element in the situation. (16)

Owing to such vital differences of opinion, the military clauses met with the "fierce opposition" of the Yem Sambaur government. The stalemate was resolved when King Sihanouk dismissed the government "on the insistence of the French authorities." (17)

Thus the 1949 agreements did not concede much freedom to Cambodia, notably in the economic, financial, judicial and military spheres. Naturally, therefore, the agreements did not satisfy the Cambodian nationalist aspirations. The King, too, was not pleased with the outcome, but he had faith in France. Echoing these sentiments he told High Commissioner Pignon:

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(14) Quoted from Lewis, *Dragon Apparent*, 204.


I myself have previously interpreted many a time the sentiments of the Cambodian Nation to France in order to specify our desiderata and our aspirations, as well as our conception of our independence, with total respect for the French interests in this country, and in the hope that the free association of France and Cambodia within the French Union would largely benefit both the Nations. I sincerely hope that the future would permit France to satisfy to the maximum these desiderata and aspirations so that the status of Cambodia might conform to the wishes of the people . . . . (18)

A few Other Cambodian Grievances

The Cambodian nationalists had a few other grievances against France. They related to the transfer of the Saigon port, the navigation of the Mekong river, and the cession of certain western provinces to the French-sponsored Vietnam. Cambodia felt rightly that in view of her favourable balance of trade and her traditional fear of Vietnam the rights over the ports of Saigon and the navigation of the Mekong should not pass exclusively into the hands of Vietnam. (19) At the Pau Conference (1950)

(18) Cambodge, 11 June 1950.

(19) Princess Yukanthor feared that if Cambodia was to depend on the port of Saigon her external trade would be "strangulated." Moreover, she said, that Cambodia did not want to be a "tributary of the port of Saigon." See La Liberté, 3 November 1950.

Since the Dalat Conference (July, 1946) Cambodia had been urging France to provide her with an alternative outlet, say, through Réam in the Gulf of Thailand. In deference to her wishes the French modernized the port of Phnom Penh. This did not, however, satisfy the Cambodian demand for an outlet to the sea. In her anxiety to be free from Vietnam's control Cambodia started at one stage negotiations with Thailand for the construction of a railroad express service between the capitals of the two countries. See Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, Minority Problems in Southeast Asia (Stanford, 1955) 181-2.
M. Sum-Hieng, the chairman of the Cambodian delegation, stated that the Cambodian "national feeling was very much aroused to demand a favourable solution of the navigation of the Mekong and of the commercial port of Saigon." (20) As a workable solution, the Cambodians suggested quadripartite control over the Saigon port and the internationalization of the Mekong in the same way as the River Danube. (21) In neither of the cases did the Cambodian demands receive sufficient attention. Vietnam established her sovereignty over the port, guaranteeing, however, a "maximum of impartiality" to all the users. The navigation of the Mekong was placed under the direction of the Mekong Consultative Commission presided over by a Cambodian national. (22)

Perhaps what affected the Cambodian nationalist feeling most was the transfer to Vietnam of the three western provinces of Cochinchina, namely, Rachgia, Soctrong and Travinh, which the Cambodians claimed as theirs on the basis of race, history and

(20) "Conference Inter-États," 1447 (Notes Et Etudes Documentaires, 1951) 8. See also France, Annales de l'Assemblée de l'Union Française, Débats, 1 (1949) 514.


(22) France, besides claiming a place in the Consultative Commission, reserved certain rights regarding the use of the port. When the Vietnamese delegation protested against the presence of the French in the consultative commission the latter replied that she was the major user of the river with 100% of the military fleet and 80% of the commercial shipping. See Jean Oudinot, "Le Nouveau Régime de la Navigation sur le Mekong et du Port de Commerce de Saigon" in La Liberté, 30 September 1950. This article gives a detailed review regarding the deliberations on this subject at the Pau Conference, 1950. See also Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, 278.
population. (23) Ever since the establishment of the French Protectorate, Cambodia never ceased to remind France of her historical rights over these areas. In spite of these reminders, France, having committed herself to the Bao Dai solution in Vietnam, transferred those areas to Vietnam. Whether France's troubles in Vietnam did or did not end, certainly, she gained the displeasure of the Cambodian nation.

King Sihanouk and his supporters, in spite of the unrealistic attitude of the French authorities, believed in achieving independence through non-violent means. Following the 1949 agreements, however, a new alignment of nationalist forces had taken place in the country. The right-wing democrats joined the King, and along with the Conservatives, formed what may be termed as the Royalist group. Two militant nationalist groups, namely, the Radical and the Thanist groups, also came into being. The former group was composed of those nationalists who aligned themselves both ideologically and institutionally with the Vietminh. The latter group, built around ex-Prime Minister

(23) Referring to this fact M. Sok Chhong, a Cambodian delegate to the French Union Assembly, stated on 14 April 1949 that the statistics taken as early as 1888 proved that these provinces contained a Cambodian majority. In support of this he supplied the Assembly with the following figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Province</th>
<th>Cambodians</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachgia</td>
<td>18,080</td>
<td>9,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soctrand</td>
<td>37,317</td>
<td>26,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travinh</td>
<td>51,055</td>
<td>46,942</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further, he recalled the assurances given to Cambodia by the Japanese and Nguyen Van Giap, Head of the Government of Nam Bo, in 1945, and of their readiness, in principle, to rectify the frontiers between Cambodia and Cochinchina. France, Annales de l'Assemblée de l'Union Française, Débats, 1(1949) 472-3.

An equally forceful claim was made by Princess Yukanthor. She bitterly complained about the systematic "Annamatization" policy of Vietnam towards the Cambodian residents. See Ibid., 516.
Son Ngoc Thanh, was composed of the left-wing democrats, Thanh's former colleagues like Pach Chhoeun, Issaraks and sympathisers like students and civil servants. Unlike the Radicals, the Thanists were purely nationalistic without having a Marxist bias. Both of them however believed in armed violence against French rule, and also against the pro-French Royalist elements in the kingdom.

**The Development of Cambodian Radicalism**

Cambodian Radicalism, and its organisation the Khmer Vietminh, was largely the product of Vietminh inspiration and encouragement. Ever since the establishment of the Bao Dai régime as a rival to the Vietminh in 1949 the latter felt that a successful opposition to the French rule was possible only through a closer association with like-minded nationalists from Cambodia and Laos. With this object in view, the Vietminh organised a Convassing Committee for the Creation of a Revolutionary Cambodian People's Party. The Committee's main task was to gain the ear and support of the Cambodians by professing to help them disinterestedly to regain genuine freedom for Cambodia. Besides propaganda, the Vietminh also organised special armed units called the "Vietnamese Troops to Help Cambodia," with headquarters at Prey Veng in southern Cambodia, and a "Central Office South" with Sieu Heng as its head. By the end of 1950 a fairly complete net-work of what are known as Cadre Committees were instituted and kept under the direction of a Vietnamese, Nguyen Thanh Son.
Thanks to its organisational ability, the Vietminh cells found a way even into the remote Cambodian villages. (24)

In the meantime, Cambodian radicalism, too, was assuming an institutional form as a preliminary to the establishment of the closest links with the Lien Viet Front of Vietnam and the Pathet Lao of Laos. The Cambodian radicals held the first National Congress of Free Cambodia on 17 April 1950 where two committees, namely, the People's Liberation Central Committee, (PLCC) and Central Executive Committee of the United Front were formed. The latter body was headed by a Vietminh leader, Son Ngoc Minh. The PLCC transformed itself subsequently into the "Provisional Government" and finally, into the Government of National Resistance with Keo Moni as its "foreign minister." (25)

The three United Fronts of Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos met in a conference for three days, from 20 to 22 of November 1950. At this conference a Joint United Front of Indochina was formed. The three Fronts agreed at this conference to pool their resources in order "to gain real Independence and Unity for their Fatherland." It was further agreed: "To expose the intrigues of French imperialists in bestowing faked independence on the puppets and regard any agreement signed by the puppets of the three countries as null and void." (26)


There is some valuable information in this work regarding the Vietminh organization directed towards Cambodia.


Five months later, that is, in March, 1951, at a joint conference a "common programme of action" was drafted directed mainly against the French. (27) It was on the basis of this programme that the Vietminh "volunteers" entered Cambodia subsequently. (28) A Cambodian national flag with a gold tower on a red background was also adopted. A Joint People's Committee was also elected here "to carry out the resolutions of the Joint National United Front and to exchange experiences." (29) After the meeting the Cambodian delegate, Sieu Heng, made a significant statement. He said:

From now onwards, we, the Cambodian people, will no longer fight alone, but as a member of the Front with the support of the Indochinese peoples and the World Camp of Peace and Democracy. Under the clear-sighted leadership of President Ho and with the friendly assistance, both moral and material, the people and army of Cambodia will fight resolutely for their liberation and for the maintenance of World Peace and are sure to win victory. (30)

The Vietminh leaders in Cambodia, Nguyen Thanh Son and Son Ngoc Minh, organised a few military and political training schools with a view to orienting the Cambodians to the Vietminh ideology and discipline. (31) Their Cambodian counterparts were given only secondary places in the formulation and execution of the Vietminh policies.

(27) Ibid., No. 385/VNS-R, 28 April 1951.
(28) Burchett, Mekong Upstream, 113.
(30) Ibid.
The Cambodian Radicals, with all this fraternization with the Vietminh, did not seem to have gained any appreciable following among their people. This was largely because of the traditional hatred of the Cambodians towards the Vietnamese, and also because of the dislike for the violence which the communist doctrine preached. Thus lacking in wide popular appeal, the Cambodian Radicals, at best, tended to play a secondary role in the movement, besides providing a legal cover to the Vietminh for a free and open entry into Cambodia.

In any event, the organisation of the Vietminh-inspired Khmer Vietminh movement led to a fresh outbreak of acts of terrorism and anti-government propaganda in the kingdom. The 1949 treaties were attacked as "humiliating" treaties signed by the "pro-French and anti-People's elements."

The new Cabinet of Monivong, who signed the humiliating Auriol-Monivong /Franco-Cambodian/Treaty of November 1949, was composed of pro-French and anti-People's elements set up by French imperialists in the same way as the Tran Van Huu's Cabinet-in Vietnam with a hope of saving their base interests now in a critical situation. (32)

The Cambodians, therefore, were urged to ignore the treaties and to resist the French with whatever weapons available to them. "You who have guns," the propaganda stated, "use your guns; you who have swords, use your swords; you who have neither guns nor swords arm yourself with bamboo sticks . . . " (33)

The Khmer Vietminh also organised workers' strikes, and attempted to destroy the plantations. (34) Its army wing, the


(34) Cambodge, 16 August 1950; see also Vietnam Information No. 415/VNS-R, 15 November 1951.
People's Liberation Army (PLA), engaged itself in terroristic activities in the countryside and on the highways. (35) Travel outside the chief cities consequently became extremely difficult and risky. The Phnom Penh-Battambang railway service, the usual target of rebel attack, functioned during daytime only under heavy military escort. (36) The entire Cambodian coastal and the northwestern areas were full of the Vietminh-Khmer Vietminh activities. Some of these parts were claimed by the rebels to be "liberated," or "free zones." (37) The fact that Phnom Penh itself was not free from the terrorist menace was known when a Vietminh agent murdered M. de Raymond, the French Commissioner in Cambodia, in broad daylight on 29 October 1951 at his official residence. (38)

The Organisation of the Thanist Rebel Group

When the Vietminh-inspired Cambodian radical movement was thus engaged in acts of terrorism and sabotage, the ex-Prime Minister Son Ngoc Thanh entered the Cambodian political scene. His re-entry into Cambodian political life helped to rouse the Cambodians — politicians, students, bonzes and others, into fervish nationalist activity. As a champion of total independence


(37) For details as to the rebel claims, see Vietnam Information No. 365/VNS-R, 23 December 1950 and No. 366/VNS-R, 30 December 1951; see also Cambodge, 1 June 1950.

(38) Ibid., 30 October 1951. A 'boy' in the Hôtel du Commissariat was arrested for having abetted the crime. Ibid.
for Cambodia from the French he became a formidable opponent of the royalists, and of the King himself.

Strangely enough, the return of Son Ngoc Thanh to Cambodia on 29 October 1951 coincided with the assassination of M. de Raymond. We have noted before the events leading to his arrest in October 1945. (39) He was tried in Saigon for treason and was sentenced to twenty years of penal servitude. While undergoing trial in France, the penal servitude was commuted to simple surveillance. Taking advantage of this limited freedom, Thanh pursued his law studies at Poitiers in France. Apparently disgusted with the enforced exile in France, he wrote several letters to King Sihanouk requesting the latter to prevail upon the French authorities to permit him to return home. (40) The King, partly in deference to the requests of the Democrats and popular wishes, made several representations to the French Government regarding the release of his ex-prime minister. He informed the French that the release of Thanh "shall have the most pleasing effect on the Cambodian public opinion and shall be a political act of far-reaching importance on Franco-Cambodian relations." (41) This representation, as well as Thanh's personal

(39) See Chapter Two.

(40) See Son Ngoc Thanh's letters to Norodom Sihanouk in Sam Sary, Le Grande Figure, 134-41.


This book is a collection of Norodom Sihanouk's articles written originally for Réalités cambodiennes, Phnom Penh. This book makes an attempt to show that the King alone was responsible for the achievement of Cambodian independence.
undertaking to abstain from participating in Cambodian politics, facilitated his early release and return home on 29 October 1951. (42)

Even though Thanh was away from the country for about four years his popularity among the Cambodians remained undiminished. On arrival at the Cambodian air-port (Pochentong), he was accorded a formal welcome by important government officials and ministers like Premier Huy Kanthoul, Sonn San, President of the National Assembly, members of Cabinet and the Council of the Kingdom. More significant than this was the "rousing reception" accorded to him by about ten thousand Cambodians who greeted him as "Our Hope," "Our National Hero," "Symbol of Independence," etc. (43) Thanh, unruffled by these manifestations of popular affection, kept himself aloof from politics for about two months (November and December 1951). He refused to join any political party. Nor did he prefer to accept any cabinet post offered to him by the Royal Government through Premier Huy Kanthoul. (44) In the meantime, however, he engaged himself in renewing and developing his contacts with his former associates, bonzes and others.

In January 1952, he plunged heart and soul into the independence movement. While expressing his personal devotion to King Sihanouk and loyalty to the Throne, he attacked the compromising attitude of the King and his government towards

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(42) Son Ngoc Thanh's letter to Norodom Sihanouk on 21 October 1949 in Sam Sary, Le Grande Figure, 134.
(43) Cambodge, 30 October 1951.
(44) Sihanouk, L'Action de SM Norodom Sihanouk, 24.
French colonial rule. At Takeo, to the south of Cambodia, he made his policy clear. He exhorted to his spell-bound audience at Takeo that the Cambodian independence achieved so far was only partial and not complete. There shall be neither full independence, he pointed out, nor peace and security in the country until the last French soldiers were cleared out of the country. (45) Independence would be a distant ideal, he said, unless the Cambodians struggled unitedly.

With the object of infusing fresh nationalist vigour into his compatriots, he started in January 1952 a newspaper the Khmer Krouk, or Cambodian Awake. The first issue of this paper stated:

We know that the Cambodian people, who had been under the influence of anaesthesia since a long time, are now awake, and are already on their feet. No obstacle can now stop this awakening from moving ahead because it constitutes a factor of high importance in the world to-day... This is the time when we should struggle against all obstacles in order to build up our destiny for prosperity as it used to be in the time of Angkor... This paper appeals to all people to stand up for the achievement of complete independence. (46)

Because of its vigorous anti-French tone, the paper was suspended by the Royal Government on the insistence of the French authorities. Not long after this, Thanh withdrew to Siem reap-Battambang region and settled himself near the Thai frontier from where he was to lead his struggle against French rule. He found

(45) Son Ngoc Thanh toured this region along with Pach Chhoeun, his former associate and Minister of Information in 1951. Wherever he went he was given a rousing reception. *Cambodge*, 8 and 9 January 1952.

(46) This is a liberal translation of a passage found in the first issue of the Khmer Krouk. Khmer Krouk (Phnom Penh), 11 January 1952.
in Ea Sichau, till then a Director of Excise and Customs Department, an able, youthful, and loyal collaborator.

This abrupt withdrawal of Thanh from the capital, as future events were to show, was a turning-point in his political career. What impelled him to do so? Certainly, his burning patriotism, loyalty to the Throne, intelligence and political experience, besides his popularity among the Cambodians, could have been great assets both for him as well as for the Nation. Having these qualifications of Thanh in mind, the Royal Government, as noted above, offered him several cabinet posts which he declined. King Sihanouk too convinced the French of the necessity of bringing Thanh back to normal political life as soon as time and circumstances permitted it. (47) Moreover, the King and his government were not alone in thinking on these lines. For example, Cambodge, reporting on the unprecedented mass welcome accorded to Thanh, wrote: "This historic manifestation is a great support for the Government in its task of national reconstruction." (48)

Why, then, did Thanh choose to leave the Cambodian capital and settle himself in some obscure place? In the first place, his whole political outlook was coloured by strong anti-French feelings. He entered the Cambodian political scene in 1942 as an enemy of French colonialism, which sentiments he once again demonstrated in 1945. His stay in France, it seems clear, had


Sihanouk even assured Thanh that the latter could enter Cambodian politics after a "period of trial," and that too only for a brief period. See Norodom Sihanouk's letter to Son Ngoc Thanh on 23 May 1950 in Sam Sary, Le Grande Figure, 131.

(48) Cambodge, 30 October 1951.
reinforced his anti-French feelings. Unlike other nationalists like Pach Chhoeun, who also suffered like him in French prisons, Thanh would not compromise either with the French or pro-French elements except on the basis of full political freedom for Cambodia. Secondly, the mass welcome he received on the day of his arrival in Phnom Penh in October 1951 could have led him to believe that his people were thirsting for independence, and that he was their chosen leader. Thirdly, the royalist opposition to the French seemed to him to be rather superficial. Otherwise, how could one explain King Sihanouk decorating Lt. Col. des Essars with a military medal at a time when under his command Cambodian villages were being subjected to almost indiscriminate attacks on the pretext of their being Vietminh hide-outs? (49) Nor had he much confidence in the anti-French attitude of the royal government. (50) To cap it all, the suspension of his newspaper, Khmer Krouk, which was only anti-French in its expressions, convinced him that the King and his government were still subservient to the French authorities. Moreover, the French themselves were capable of arresting him as they were still in control of the Police.

King Sihanouk and his government did not seem to have been aware of the flight of Son Ngoc Thanh from the capital. When there was a strong rumour in the capital that Thanh and Ea Sichau were "kidnapped" by an Issarak band while they were travelling in a convoy near Kralanh, to the west of Siem Reap,

(49) Ibid., 14 February 1951.

(50) Premier Huy Kanthoul, for example, felt that the vital differences between France and Cambodia concerning the judicial and military clauses of 1949 treaty were only "family affairs." Ibid., 14 February 1952.
on 9 March 1952, the royal government, on this assumption, directed the provincial authorities of the Siem réap region to take immediate steps to trace the whereabouts of both of them. (51) Moreover, when the Thanist press and radio propaganda was attacking Sihanouk and his government, the latter doubted whether the propaganda tracts were issued by Thanh out of his own free will or under duress. (52) By this flight, however, Son Ngoc Thanh not only ruined his future political career but also gained the implacable enmity of King Sihanouk.

No sooner did he go into the jungle than he began to contact important Issarak leaders like Pok Khun, the founder of the Issarak organization in 1940, Keo Tak, Leav Keomoni and others. With their support he reorganized the Cambodian Committee of National Liberation. He also tried to enlist the support of Dap Chhuon, who with his Free Corps of about 1,000 strong was enjoying full control over Siem réap and Kompong Thom. The Thanist Issarak group often resorted to armed attacks in the countryside. Thanh's clandestine radio installation, the "Voice of Free Cambodia," began to catch the ear of a sizable section of Cambodian intelligentsia, including the bonzes and students. The Cambodians were urged to "abandon the way of docility and submission," and to resist the French colonial rule with determination. (53) It tried to reduce the King to the status of a cowardly figure in the estimation of the Cambodian

(51) Ibid., 14 March 1952.
(52) Ibid., 21 March 1952.
masses. On the other hand, the stature of Son Ngọc Thanh was sought to be increased as a true patriot struggling for national independence. One of such tracts stated: "We all must unite around His Excellency Son Ngọc Thanh, who directs our national revolution, to regain independence for our country and to restore to its inhabitants their dignity as free men." (54) King Sihanouk's popularity and patriotism was never questioned before so seriously as at this time.

The Royal Government, indeed, had been taking serious steps since mid-1950 to stem the growing unrest in the country. In addition to creating a "Bureau of Study and Coordination of Security Question" attached to the prime minister, 'auto-defence' units and mobile units were also organized at the provincial level. (55) High Cambodian civil servants were appointed as military chiefs to the troubled spots like Battambang. (56) The Government's military budget, besides the US aid obtained through France, rose from 75 to 200 million piastres between 1950 and 1951. The expenditure on the National Police and 'auto-defence' exceeded 40 million piastres. (57) In spite of its sincere efforts, the Royal Government was handicapped for want of arms and other equipment. M. Nhiek Tioulonț, Minister for Information, stated that it was not possible "for the moment to have a total, effective engagement" with the rebels. (58)

(54) Ibid., 15 July 1950, 70.
(56) Ibid., 25 May 1950.
(57) Royaume du Cambodge, Conference de Presse de S. E. Nhiek Tioulonț, 18 June 1951 (Phnom Penh, 1951) 9.
(58) Ibid., 14.
The Constitutional Crisis

To make matters worse, the country at this moment was passing through an acute phase of constitutional crisis in its political history. The party-struggle that was developing from the time Penn Nouth had formed his government in August 1948 took a bad turn when Yem Sambaur came to power in January 1949. (59) Though his was a minority government, Yem Sambaur was able to weather all opposition to him because of King Sihanouk's unstinted support. As he was loyal to the King so was the King to him. It was this kind of relationship that made it possible for Yem Sambaur to obtain the dissolution of the National Assembly when some of the deputies tried to bring down his government on a procedural issue. (60)

The second government of Yem Sambaur formed on 26 September 1949 signed the 1949 agreements. These treaties were greeted with open hostility both by his political adversaries like Ioe Koeus and Im Phon and the public who were influenced by them. (61) Personal and party strife grew to such unfortunate proportions

(59) See Chapter Three.

(60) When Dong Sam An, Secretary of State of the Interior, resigned his post, a democratic deputy asked Yem Sambaur to obtain a fresh vote of confidence from the National Assembly. When Yem Sambaur rejected the demand, Im Phon, a deputy, introduced a censure motion against the Government. When this obtained a good support from the deputies, Yem Sambaur obtained a decree from King Sihanouk for the dissolution of the National Assembly itself. It was dissolved on 18 September 1949. See Évolution de la Politique Intérieure Khmère de Fin 1945 à Juin 1951 (Phnom Penh, 1951) 21.

(61) Cambodge, 3 August 1951. The students, in particular, became susceptible to such incitement. Ibid., 13 December 1949.
that it manifested itself in political murders. The most notable of such was the assassination of Ioe-Koeus, a former President of National Assembly and a leading figure in the Democratic Party; in his party office on 15 January 1950 by a hand-grenade hurled at the party office. (62)

Despite these unhappy developments, Yem Sambaur was able to continue in office because of the support of the King. The king's confidence in his prime minister was such that when the Democratic, Liberal and Khmer Renovation parties did not want him as the head of the proposed Government of National Union, the King could not let him down. On this occasion he said: "I cannot, obviously, ask Prime Minister Sambaur to relinquish his office in view of the impressive services he has done to the country." (63)

Sihanouk, however, could not keep his prime-minister in office for long. Yem Sambaur, besides his interest in local politics, was committed to the achievement of maximum advantage for the country from the 1949 agreements. He, as noted above, became one of the bitter critics of the judicial and military clauses. And when his government refused to ratify those clauses, King Sihanouk, under "pressure" from the French authorities, dismissed the government. He was also excluded from the National

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(62) Ibid., 16 January 1950 and 20 January 1950. Along with Ioe-Koeus, one Nget Hien was also killed. The bomb was thrown by an ex-Issarak. The real brains behind the affair were not traced. It is alleged that the individual responsible for this unfortunate project was allowed to escape from the country unhindered by some interested persons. Le Democrat, 11 May 1950.

(63) Cambodge, 30 March 1950. The king, evidently concerned with the growing party strife, tried to form an all-party government called the Government of National Union. Ibid.
Union Government formed by Prince Monipong, an uncle of the King, on 1 June 1950. It was this government that signed the Accords of June 1950 and the Pau Agreements of December 1950 which were criticised so vehemently by the nationalist rebels. Partly due to the Premier's unpopularity and partly due to "grave dissensions" in the parties, the Monipong Government resigned office on 27 February 1951.

Bickering and in-fighting between the political clans and rivalries, mutual accusations, corruption, dissidence, banditry, intrigue, pressure from the French, as well as a three months' crisis after the fall of Monipong — marked this period until it was finally decided to hold elections again. (64)

When the general elections were held for the third time on 9 September 1951, the Democratic Party, despite the divisions in its ranks, once again returned to the legislature with a comfortable majority of 54 to 78. (65) Huy Kanthoul formed the government. Party quarrels and personal jealousies continued as before. It took an ominous turn when Huy Kanthoul arrested his rival, Yem Sambaur. In the meantime, the propaganda of Son Ngoc Thanh "caused a new tension in Franco-Cambodian relations." (66) Many of the democrats grew mutinous against the King and the government on the ground of the latter's accommodative

(64) Martin F. Herz, A Short History of Cambodia (New York, 1958) 104-5. (emphasis added)


policy to the French. King Sihanouk, partly upset by the rebellious nature of the democrats and more so under strong French pressure, finally dismissed the government on 15 June 1952 and assumed personal rule.

When the King dismissed the Democratic government he did so not only because he was at loggerheads with it but also because he was under extreme pressure — French tanks were patrolling Phnom Penh and the French Minister for Associated States, Jean Letourneau, had specifically declared that France would make no concession to a Democratic government. (67)

The King, on the eve of assuming personal rule, accused the Democrats of having placed personal interests above the national interests and of bringing confusion and chaos in the country, and stated that if the people granted him full powers for three years he would bring about the "miracle" of not only restoring internal peace and order, but also of achieving "full and satisfactory independence for our country." (68) The King solemnly promised his people:

If you are agreeable to this period of three years, I promise before the Devotas and the Most Real Powers that I would place myself at your disposal to be judged in public by the People on the expiry of this period regarding the results achieved, in the presence of foreign observers and witnesses representing at least six independent, free and democratic nations. (69)

(67) Martin F. Herz, A Short History of Cambodia, 87. Le Thanh Khoi states that when the French forces were forced to withdraw from the Hoa binh, they were compelled to increase their military strength. He writes: "To obtain further American aid which accounted already for 33% of the total expenses, pressure was brought on Indochina capitals. In Saigon Tran Van Huu was replaced by Nguyen Van Tam. In Phnom Penh, the King assumed power." Le Thanh Khoi, "Cambodia in Transition," 22.


(69) Ibid.; 21.
The party government was buried once and for all, never to be revived again. But this did not help to solve the problem. On the contrary, it widened the chasm between the King and the Parliament. The Democratic majority in the Parliament viewed the King's act as "unconstitutional and undemocratic," (70) and withheld their support to the Royalist government. Son Ngoc Thanh's "Voice of Free Cambodia" commenting on the dismissal of the Huy Kanthoul government stated that the dismissal was "because Huy had asked for more independence." (71) It charged that M. Risterucci, the French Commissioner in Cambodia, and the Cambodian "traitors" had forced the dissolution of the Government placed and the Assembly in an "impasse." The Cambodian Assembly, it stated, still breathed but it was "the breathing of a dying man," and the national Constitution itself was "only worth the cost of the paper on which it was printed." (72) The growing volume of inciting Thanist propaganda influenced the parliamentarians and the Cambodian students. The students, notably of the Lycée Sisowath and the Ecole Normal accused the King as a "traitor" to the Nation. They organised strikes and exploded grenades aimed at their French professors. (73) The hostile deputies

(70) Asia 1952-3 (Saigon) 205-6.
(72) Ibid.
(73) Cambodge, 11 September 1952 and 15 September 1952.

In Lycée Sisowath a grenade was placed under the chair of a French professor which wounded two students when it exploded. Five more grenades were said to have been recovered from the school premises. Le Monde, 10 January 1953.

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persisted in "systematic obstruction" of governmental measures. They opposed the Government's budget proposals providing for more expenditure on security measures, and the introduction of martial law in the country.

Matters came to a head in early January 1953. The Royalists like Prime Minister Penn Nouth, and the King himself, contended that the Parliament had become of late a "refuge for treason." The democratic deputies were alleged to be in possession of arms. They were accused of having organised an "assassination committee" to do away with some of the principal royalists and also of being in "outright collusion" with Son Ngoc Thanh, who according to Penn Nouth was a communist or a crypto-communist. When the democratic deputies refused to pass the budget and martial law proposals of the government, they were further accused of entertaining the "criminal intention" of shielding the Radical and Issarak rebels. (74) On these grounds, King Sihanouk declared the "nation in danger" and dissolved both the National Assembly and the Council of the Kingdom on 13 January 1953. On the same day martial law was promulgated providing for the curtailment of freedom of speech, association and correspondence; the surrender of, and search for, arms and ammunition in individual possession,

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The Cambodian students in Paris also opposed the monarch on the ground of his pro-French attitude. La Lumière, the students' organ, is stated to have urged the Cambodians "to take revenge upon the Monarchy, the enemy of the people, a traitor to the Nation being subservient to the French." It was, therefore, "a Regime fit to be overthrown." See Norodom Sihanouk, "Le Cambodge Deviendra-t-il une Republique," Réalités cambodgiennes, 22 August 1959.

and the arrest of suspects. (75) Several democratic deputies like Sok Chhong, a former Minister of National Economy and a delegate to the French Union Assembly, Yok Ho, a former Vice-President of the National Assembly, Im Phon, etc. were arrested. (76) A National Consultative Assembly was formed with Norodom Montana as its President. (77)

King Sihanouk seemed to have suffered from no qualms as to his extra-constitutional measures. To a Le Monde correspondent he said a few days after the dissolution of the Parliament: "I am the natural ruler of the country, the people have known none but the king, and my authority has never been questioned." (78) His government carried out several military operations like "Operation Dragée," "Operation Mossi," "Operation Fidelité," etc. against the rebels. (79) Besides military operations, several Cambodian villages were regrouped with a view to checking the Vietminh infiltration and activities in the border areas like Prey Veng, Kampot, Takeo, etc. (80) This measure was resented by Cambodian villagers, particularly the bonzes, who would not normally leave their hearth and home on religious grounds. The King's

(75) Cambodge, 15 January 1953.
(76) Le Monde, 17 January 1953.
(78) Ibid., 18-19 January 1953.
(80) For more details regarding the process of regroupment see M. Galarneau "Le Regroupment de la Population," Cambodge (Revue Illustrée Khmère) 3 (weekly) (Phnom Penh) (July, 1953) 26-33.
pronouncements and actions were not in tune with the nationalist mood of the country. He was fast losing his popularity among the Cambodian intelligentsia, politicians, students, and even among the bonzes. The rebel propaganda called him "le fontouche Sihanouk," while his adversary Son Ngoc Thanh was hailed as "our hero and model of patriotism." (81)

Meanwhile, the Cambodian Radicals were gaining wider recognition in the communist world. The Cambodian delegates attended in early 1953 the Peace Conference of the Asian and Pacific Regions in Peking, and the People's Conference for Peace in Vienna. (82) At the Vienna congress the Cambodian delegate, Keo Meas, expressed the identity of the Cambodian radicals with the "World People" and declared their "determination to tighten their unity with them." (83) In March 1953 Laos was under the imminent threat of Pathet Lao-Vietminh attack. In spite of these developments, King Sihanouk reposed his confidence in the French and in the French army as a bulwark against Vietminh danger. He told Le Monde correspondent: "If the French left Indochina, we shall have independence, true, but for how long? I therefore collaborate in the military sense with the French for the defence of our liberty." (84) The King's confidence in the French army, however, was misplaced. It was not a source of help to him. On the contrary, the indiscriminate attacks of the French soldiers

(82) Vietnam Information No. 14/53, 10 April 1953.
(83) Ibid., No. 8/53, 27 February 1953.
(84) Le Monde, 18-19 January 1953.
on Cambodian villages and personal violence to individual
Cambodians only helped to drive the vacillating among the
Cambodians into the arms of his opponents. (85) Worse still,
the French army officers themselves propped up a few "false
Issarak" organisations, like that of Savang Vong (86), with their
money and material on the pretext of fighting the Vietminh.

The King was faced, on the one hand, with the nationalist
upsurge of his people. On the other hand, the French authorities
were stubborn as regards Cambodia's nationalist aspirations. So
far he had been acting as a sort of a buffer between the two
contending forces of militant native nationalism and unbending
French colonialism. In this role he became suspect in the eyes
of his people as a Francophil. Consequently he became unpopular
with the politicians, students, civil servants and bonzes. He
was now faced with a formidable opponent, Son Ngoc Thanh, whose
popularity among the intellectuals was increasing day by day.
The drift, moreover, of some of his people towards the communist
ideology was not a good augury both for his country as well as for
the throne. If he was to retrieve his waning popularity and safeguard

(85) There is a big list of such incidents compiled by
the Royal Government in Livre Jaune, 2, 1-32.

(86) Savang Vong was an ex-army officer in the Royal
Cambodian Army. He deserted the army to organise the Issarak
organisation under French patronage. King Sihanouk states that
Savang Vong was given arms and other material by the French
officers with whom he occasionally came to dine. The king made
several representations to the French army officers to suppress
this rebel. The French replies were far from satisfactory to
the king. For details see "Note Annexe Concernant l'Accord Tacit
du Commandement Français avec les Rebelles," Ibid., 1, 19-23.
See also André François Mercier, Faut-il Abandonner l'Indochine
the throne, it was necessary, and perhaps urgent, that he should work openly for his country's freedom. Compelled thus both by national and personal interests, the King was determined in his mind to satisfy his people's urge for freedom, if possible without losing the friendship of France, and if necessary by losing it. With this mission he proceeded to France on what is known as the "Royal Crusade for Independence."