PERSONALITIES AND THE REGIONAL CRISES: A CASE STUDY OF ZAHIR SHAH AND NORODOM SIHANOUK

In any negotiation process, the distinct personality styles, skills and world view of certain individuals exert considerable force. The charismatic leadership, ability to invoke traditional authority and support, capability to change with times to achieve popular acceptance and become national symbols, are certain qualities which can influence the course of events especially in crises situations. Some personalities make special efforts to secure their objectives by not only carving out a place for themselves but also throwing up to the situation a viable alternative to bring about a settlement. In certain other cases, the personalities are sought after and are seen by interested groups or parties as a viable alternative to resolve a problem. King Zahir Shah of Afghanistan and Prince Sihanouk of Kampuchea are two contrasting examples.

Zahir Shah and Norodom Sihanouk are associated with a party to the crisis, namely the Resistance Group. Both the personalities, to a varying extent, represent the 'traditional authority' and 'national symbol'. Zahir Shah did not take active part in the resolution of crisis. But the various Afghan social groups and other nations considered the possibility of making Zahir Shah a rallying point to solve the problem - this may be called the Zahir Shah option. On the other hand, Sihanouk was extremely active and forceful, and no group or nation could afford to ignore his presence — this may be termed as Sihanouk factor.
Zahir Shah Option and the Afghan Problem

From the very early stages of the Afghanistan crisis, there was certain support for the former King Zahir Shah (deposed in 1973 and living in exile in Rome since then) from sections of bureaucracy and intellectuals, the Afghan refugees and some factions of the Afghan Resistance, to pave way for acceptance of Zahir Shah as the leader of the Afghan struggle to produce a government in exile or, alternatively a united front of the Afghan Resistance to effectively represent and direct the rebel cause. These moderate, pro-monarchist groups and the Afghan emigre leadership sought an early settlement based on the conviction that it was impossible to defeat a superpower by resort to military struggle or guerilla warfare alone. Such moves were evident in the demand for the convening of a Loya Jirga — Great National Assembly of Notables — in Pakistan. The proposed jirga was essentially intended to endorse ex-King Zahir Shah as leader of the Resistance and authorise him to negotiate a political settlement. Zahir Shah offered to resume political activity "to give an official voice to the Afghan Resistance, unite the Afghans and negotiate Soviet withdrawal."¹ The convening of a Loya Jirga was unacceptable to the Peshawar-based seven-party Afghan Resistance dominated by the fundamentalists who perceived such moves as an attempt by the monarchists to seize the leadership

of the Afghan Resistance. A major reason for the rejection of any role for Zahir Shah was that the mujahideen (committed to waging holy war) based inside Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran had already established themselves as the vanguard of the Afghan Resistance.

These Afghan Resistance groups — mainly fundamentalist — enjoyed the full support and backing of Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia with the ultimate objective of establishing an Islamic government in Kabul through the instrument of jihad. Pakistan and other backers of the Resistance showed no inclination to try the Zahir Shah option as they feared that it could alienate the fundamentalist-led Afghan Resistance and thereby damage the armed struggle.

As the Soviet Union and Kabul were reluctant to discuss the issue of internal changes in Kabul, they showed no eagerness to consider the Zahir Shah option. But in 1987, President Najibullah of Afghanistan announced the policy of national reconciliation envisaging a broad-based government with a role for all sections of the society, that implied power-sharing among factions of different ideological dispositions, through a dialogue with opposition factions, including 'moderate political groups, monarchists, and leaders of anti-state armed groups'; and a possible coalition

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2 To pre-empt such a possibility, the fundamentalist groups rallied together to form the Islamic Unity of Afghan Mujahideen (IUAM) in early 1982 which remained faction-ridden ever since its formation.
government allowing participation for the factions.\textsuperscript{3} Pakistan suggested an interim government headed by a neutral personality implying Zahir Shah. The U.S. Under Secretary of State, Michael Armacost, stated in April 1987, that Washington would not accept 'a coalition government built around and, led by the Communist Party of Afghanistan' and called on the Soviet Union to allow the seven-party alliance of Afghan Resistance in Pakistan to decide 'who should lead an interim government and how best it can be created.'\textsuperscript{4} The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev hinted that Moscow would accept former King Mohammad Zahir Shah as part of a coalition government; however, the idea of replacing the leadership of Najibullah was seen as impractical.\textsuperscript{5}

The UN mediator Diego Cordovez also made efforts to tackle the internal aspect of the Afghan crisis. Cordovez attempted to resolve the impasse in July 1987 by submitting a memorandum to Islamabad, Kabul, Moscow and Washington proposing a UN-facilitated Geneva meeting of Afghan leaders to set up "broadly-based

\textsuperscript{3}For Najibullah’s Declaration on National Reconciliation, see UN Doc.A/42/83-S/18564, of January 1987, Annex, "Declaration on National Reconciliation: Najibullah’s Address to the Special Plenum of the PDPA Central Committee, 30-31 December 1986".

\textsuperscript{4}Cited in Selig S.Harrison, "Inside the Afghan Talks", \textit{Foreign Policy}, no.72, Fall 1988, p.53.

\textsuperscript{5}Gorbachev's interview to an Italian newspaper cited in \textit{New York Times}, 21 May 1987, p.16.
transitional arrangements" with no party being assured of a predominant role and that would comprise of the Pakistan-based seven-party Afghan Resistance, Najibullah's Communist Party and "selected personalities" among the prominent Afghan exiles. In this connection, Cordovez visited Rome to meet Zahir Shah. But in the meantime, the reluctance of Pakistan and the Afghan Resistance to accept any role for Zahir Shah (dismissed as 'history-stricken' person by one Resistance leader) and Gorbachev's proposal to effect the immediate withdrawal of troops resulted in relegating the Zahir Shah option into the background.

It can therefore be inferred that though the personality of Zahir Shah maintaining low-profile taking no diplomatic initiative, was available, neither the circumstances favoured him nor he tried to change the circumstances in his favour. The disunity and polarisation among the Afghan Resistance, the prolonged nature of

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6 Cited in Harrison, n.4, p.53.


8 In the opinion of one scholar, Pakistan had its own reasons for resisting the Cordovez plan. Pakistan President Zia wanted to install a Kabul regime headed by its Islamic fundamentalist Afghan proteges, notably Gulbuddin Hekmatyars' Hizbe-Islami. Islamabad was also anxious to prevent the return of Zahir Shah who personified Afghan nationalist opposition to Pakistani hegemony, see Harrison, n.3, p.54; As to the Resistances' reason for rejecting the Zahir Shah option, the argument was that the war had radically changed the situation inside Afghanistan, where the traditional tribal leadership - owing allegiance to the monarchy - had been replaced by local resistance commanders.
the Afghan crisis which had the effect of eroding the traditional bases of power inside Afghanistan, and the unenthusiastic nature of support for the Zahir Shah option from Pakistan, Iran and Soviet Union were primarily responsible for denying a role to Zahir Shah.

**Sihanouk Factor and the Kampuchean Problem**

Sihanouk had a definite world view and sense of history which guided him in his struggle for regaining sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence for his country, Kampuchea. His initial proposal expressed in an open letter addressed to the International Conference on Kampuchea held in July 1981 (wherein he did not participate in the conference) turned out to be prophetic as the later day Accords signed in October 1991 contained most of his suggestions. The letter pointed out to the risk of failure of the conference because of the absence of Vietnam, USSR and the People's Republic of Kampuchea. He further suggested that his country be neutralized with firm international guarantees; that there be an international peacekeeping force in the event of Vietnamese withdrawal; and to solve the internal problem he proposed that elections be preceded by the general disarmament of armed Kampuchean groups and that all Kampuchean political parties without exception shall have an equal right to compete in general elections and also envisaged a provisional quadripartite Kampuchean national government. Such a foresight was
remarkable but it appeared to be premature as the conditions for acceptance of these proposals were not 'ripe' then.

**Sihanouk: A Pragmatist and Kampuchea's International Spokesman**

In order to achieve his objectives, Sihanouk displayed immense pragmatism in his methods and actions. He befriended those who were not like-minded only to seek their support and aid to fight a common enemy, but he did not hesitate to assert his position; he employed military force but understood its limitations and resorted to vigorous diplomacy; he remained stuck to his goals but was prepared to concede on the ways and means to settle the issue.

The Khmer Rouge found it politically expedient to seek a collaboration with the Prince who had persuasively and to a large extent successfully pleaded the Kampuchean case on behalf of Democratic Kampuchean in the United Nations in January 1979. The Prince, however, ruled out any such collaboration and instead established his own organisation; the Confederation of Khmer rationalists at Pyongyang (North Korea) in September 1979. In the earlier stages, he aimed at unifying the scattered and very often divided Kampuchean resistance movements based outside Kampuchea.

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However in 1981, Sihanouk announced that he was prepared to cooperate with the Khmer Rouge on certain conditions such as (a) China must arm the proposed united front (b) he should have the right to form his own armed forces and (c) that after the Vietnamese withdrawal a multiparty parliamentary system with free elections under international supervision should be established.\(^{10}\) Due to persistent pressure from China and the United States on Sihanouk to resolve his differences with the Khmer Rouge, and from the ASEAN and western countries to make the resistance more broad based, the Prince agreed in September 1981 to form a coalition government and in June 1982, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) was established.\(^{11}\) This was despite Sihanouk’s deep loathing for the Khmer Rouge who executed some of his children and grand children to put ‘an end to the race of Sihanouk’.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{10}\)For Sihanouk's preconditions for cooperating with Khmer Rouge, see *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 16 April 1982, p.31433.

\(^{11}\)Prior to this, Sihanouk formed his own political party- FUNCINPEC (The National United Front For An Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Kampuchea) which was to have its own armed forces - the ANS (Sihanoukiste National Army). This was apparently to have his own voice within the Kampuchean Resistance as against the Khmer Rouge and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF).

\(^{12}\)Further, Sihanouk was under virtual house arrest for three years under Khmer Rouge. Inspite of this he accepted Pol Pot's request to lead Kampuchean delegation to the security council to plead the case of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979. He stated that Pol Pot is a patriot and he did not like the internal policies of Pol Pot Government, yet he would support it and continue to speak out on its behalf so long as it opposes Vietnam, *New York Times*, 9 January 1979 p.1.
Sihanouk was given an honorific position as the president of CGDK which was a clear acceptance of Sihanouk as a ‘national symbol’ and as possessing the ‘traditional authority’ by virtue of being an ex-monarch to rally the various groups and unite the resistance.

Sihanouk found the coalition as an unpleasant but tactical necessity and that CGDK served as a bargaining chip to bring the Vietnamese and the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) to the negotiating table with the rebels who would have obtained the military muscle as well as legitimacy (i.e. by virtue of retaining UN seat) under the coalition government. The prince needed the coalition to fight the war and secure peace and he once stated that the final decision on Kampuchea’s future "belongs to the battlefield". Despite ideological differences, policy disagreement and his occasional threats of leaving the coalition, on the whole, Sihanouk preserved a sense of unity within the CGDK. In the view of ASEAN, Sihanouk was considered to be a respectable ‘third alternative’ between the genocidal Khmer Rouge and the PRK.\(^\text{13}\) In the ultimate analysis, the Khmer Rouge and Prince Sihanouk used each other: Khmer rouge in the hope that this will lend them a patina of respectability, and Sihanouk needed their military muscle.

Sihanouk: Assertion of Independence

The Prince threw occasional hints and held out threats that he would resign from the presidency of the coalition. For instance, in a significant comment, Sihanouk said, "If I want to negotiate with the Vietnamese, I have only to withdraw from the coalition". This was intended both as a warning to his coalition allies as well as a signal to Vietnam. The threats of resignation, which Sihanouk perfected to an art form, were chiefly undertaken as psychological manoeuvres to arm-twist his own allies over policy disagreements or factional strife to give himself more diplomatic manoeuvring room to seek a solution to the problem. The holding out of the resignation threat was based on the rationale that his presence was crucial for the very survival of the coalition.

In response to various proposals for talks sent to him by the Vietnamese and PRK to which the Chinese and Khmer Rouge were not enthusiastic, Sihanouk stepped down temporarily by proceeding on leave for one year from the presidency of CGDK in May 1987 which paved way for Sihanouk-Hun Sen talks in December 1987. At this time, he stated that he would negotiate to political settlement with

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15 On five occasions, Sihanouk resigned but on each occasion he withdrew his resignation due to pressure from his sponsors namely ASEAN, US and China.

PRK with or without the backing of his coalition partners or allies. He was high
temperamental and his resignation threat was therefore a weapon to be used again:
his opponents and to acquire a ‘breathing space’ to pursue his independe
policy/initiatives on the Kampuchean question.

As Sihanouk was unable to secure arms supply from United States, he beg:
to seek help from China. The military strength was mainly to strengthen \( \text{b} \) bargaining position vis-a-vis the coalition and also the PRK. China promised aid
all the three factions provided they stayed united. China played the Sihanouk ca
as he was seen as one who could put a human face on the genocidal record of tl
Khmer Rouge. Sihanouk responded positively to China, fully aware that h:
country was caught between powerful neighbours and set up his residence in Beijin;

**Sihanouk: Man of Dialogue**

Sihanouk attached great importance to diplomacy and negotiations. As ear
as 1981, he suggested a meeting of all parties to the conflict ‘around a conferen
table aimed at finding the ways and means of an honourable compromise’. Later, l
called for direct negotiations with Vietnam in order to create a ‘four par

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18 But according to Sihanouk himself, one of China’s reason to persuade him
live in Beijing was to isolate him from Vietnamese contacts, see N.Chanda,
government' to end the fighting in Cambodia. He also suggested an "informal meeting among all the factions concerned without preconditions" to be later followed by an international conference. This idea was a precursor to both the Jakarta Informal Talks (1988) and the Paris conference on Cambodia (1989). Sihanouk's proposals to bring about a national reconciliation were not pursued as they were always vetoed by China and the Khmer Rouge. He was a man of dialogue and stressed that the ultimate solution was a political settlement. His offer of national reconciliation was to serve as a guarantee to Vietnam that its interest would be protected in Kampuchea.

Sihanouk dismissed the Chinese position that CGDK once united could attain military victory as 'unrealistic and ridiculous'. Although he realised the importance of force or the military dimension of diplomacy, Sihanouk emphasised on

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19 The Prince said: "If you do not accept the Khmer Rouge, China will not support it, and if you reject Heng Samrin you don't have a way to put an end to the war". Unlike China and Khmer Rouge, the Prince was for a rapprochement with Vietnam.


21 Sihanouk stated: "The Vietnamese say that they will not withdraw from Cambodia until the Chinese threat is removed. I cannot assume the responsibility of removing the China threat on their northern border but I have to take the responsibility that there is no such threat via Cambodia", N.Chanda, "Sihanouk Stonewalled", Far Eastern Economic Review, 1 November 1984, p.28.

the need to form a four-party coalition (inclusive of PRK regime) and to negotiate with Vietnam (recognising its legitimate security interests in the region).\textsuperscript{23} He knew that a military victory would only bring the Khmer Rouge back to power.\textsuperscript{24}

Sihanouk exhibited a paternalistic style of diplomacy. He described his relationship with the 38 year old Prime Minister Hun Sen as one of father and son.\textsuperscript{25} At another meeting he reacted to Hun Sen's demand that Khmer Rouge guerilla force be liquidated by saying: "with 140,000 Vietnamese troops to help you, you have not managed in nine years to eliminate them. How do you suggest I do it?"\textsuperscript{26}

To Vietnam and PRK, Sihanouk had no role to play as long as he associated himself with the Khmer Rouge and 'the Chinese expansionists'. In the words of one Vietnamese official, "Ten years ago Sihanouk's name was strong enough to rally a country against the Americans. Now his name can cause us some problem, but they


\textsuperscript{24}He said, "We cannot bring them (the Vietnamese) to their knees by force of arms. So we have to work out an honourable solution for them", ibid., p.13.


are tolerable. Ten years from now he will be forgotten".27

Sihanouk: Public Diplomacy and the Use of Media

Norodom Sihanouk is considered as the pressman’s delight who has an almost unrivalled record of marathon press conferences and interviews. He very successfully put across his letters to the editors and addressed open letters either to the United Nations or to his people. He would adopt an aggressive public relations exercise and would never allow his name to be dragged into controversies.28 His outpourings when the western countries were planning to de-recognise the CGDK in 1989 were also significant.29 In yet another case, Sihanouk undertook the task of correcting the many 'historical falsehoods' regarding Cambodia and cogently presented a point-by-point rebuttal of what he called ‘anti- Sihanouk thesis’ by one of his countrymen and charged that it was ‘directly inspired in all the themes of

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28 When journalists (such as Mrs. Elizabeth Becker) accused him of having a 'thirst of power' and as being an 'obstacle to agreement ', the Prince came out with a letter to the editor answering that as an unfair, dishonest and intolerable charge, see New York Times, 13 March 1984, p.I4; Message from H.R.H Sihanouk to his countrymen living in Cambodia and those living outside, UNDOC.A/44/168-S/20511, Annexe II, pp.4-6.

29 Open Letter of H.R.H. Norodom Sihanouk to the powers of the free world whose Governments are prepared to "Drop Sihanouk and CGDK" and to 'embrace' Hun Sen regime, UNDOC.A/45/83-S/21086, annexe, pp.2-8.
propaganda rather despicable and unjust towards him.\textsuperscript{30}

Sihanouk was less in the role of a resistance leader and more in a role as a roving ambassador. With official residence in Pyongyang (North Korea), Beijing and Paris, the Prince shuttled to various capitals of the world regularly pleading the Kampuchean case, seeking aid and attempting to mediate/negotiate his country’s crisis.\textsuperscript{31}

Prince Sihanouk, unlike Zahir Shah, remained one of the main actors and an extraordinary survivor throughout the Kampuchean crisis. He had the quality of a natural politician, is considered hereditary and spiritual leader of the Khmer people (deva raja) and commanded the genuine affections of most of them. He not only remained a rallying point to large sections of Kampuchean society, but also, with his impressive personality, made the great powers realise his importance in the resolution of the crisis.


\textsuperscript{31}He was a great organiser. His party, FUNCINPEC had branches in the following countries: France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, USA, Canada, Australia, Thailand and Kampuchea.