

# King Sihamoni Seeks Neutrality in a Deeply Divided Nation

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A year ago this week, the world was awakened to the popularity of Cambodia's monarchy.

What had been latent adoration for the late King Father Norodom Sihanouk became a mass expression of grief over his death. More than a million people lined the streets of Phnom Penh when the King's body was returned from China on October 17.

## *–News Analysis*

Cambodians from around the world also went online and a massive archive of photos and videos of the former king and head of state was spontaneously compiled on Facebook, connecting young Cambodians to the memories that had their elders weeping in front of the Royal Palace.

Over the past month, the reigning king, Norodom Sihamoni, has also been at the center of the public's attention.

By presiding over the convening of the National Assembly, amid a boycott by the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), King Sihamoni was thrust into a political dispute that has divided the country. Unable to rise above the partisan fray, King Sihamoni, despite what fellow royals say have been his best efforts to remain neutral, has become embroiled in it.

During Prime Minister Hun Sen's first speech to his newly approved Cabinet on September 25, the prime minister warned Facebook users not to take advantage of the platform to criticize the King, who is "inviolable" according to the Constitution.

For some, that warning has not been heeded.

"We believe that the fate [of the monarchy] can be saved," said Truong Mealy, a former chief of the Royal Cabinet under then King Sihanouk.

"We have faith in stability, faith in peace, sooner or later they will understand him [King Sihanouk]," Mr. Mealy added.

In 1993, it was then King Sihanouk who engineered an agreement for his son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, who was elected as prime minister as head of the royalist Funcinpec party, to serve as first co-prime minister alongside Mr. Hun Sen, who would be the second co-prime minister.

Funcinpec had won the majority of votes in the election, but Mr. Hun Sen's CPP had no intention of giving up power. A return to civil war was a possibility.

"He [King Sihanouk] said 'accept the reality,'" Mr. Mealy said. "By realizing that we are a small nation, [the country] should have some stability first, and social justice will come later," he said.

But King Sihanouk also set a precedent for how to avoid the sort of partisan conflict that has now surrounded his son. After the 2003 election, the CPP did not win enough seats in the National Assembly to form a government, which then required a two-thirds majority vote of approval in parliament.

Demanding reform of the judiciary and the nullification of previous border agreements with Vietnam, Sam Rainsy, then head of the Sam Rainsy Party, and Prince Ranariddh joined together as the "Alliance of Democrats" and pledged to boycott the National Assembly until their demands were met.

The alliance also demanded that a new government include members of all three parties, including the SRP, who Mr. Hun Sen refused to even negotiate with. King Sihanouk called the leaders of the parties together in an effort to find a compromise that would allow a new government to be formed, but to no avail.

With the parties unwilling to compromise, King Sihanouk left the country.

The King said he would not endorse a new government until a political solution had been found that was suitable to all parties. Funcinpec would eventually make the controversial decision to abandon the Alliance of Democrats and join in a two-party coalition with the CPP 11 months later. That deal involved a change to the Constitution allowing for a new government to be formed with a simple majority of lawmakers in the National Assembly.

King Sihanouk let it be known that he was not happy about the constitutional change. In reply to a letter regarding the legality of the constitutional change, King Sihanouk, who was in North Korea at the time, wrote: "I have no power or ability to change or help."

On several other occasions, King Sihanouk chose to leave the country rather than become engulfed in the infighting of the country's political parties.

By officiating over the ceremony that installed the one-party CPP National Assembly, King Sihamoni "did not follow his father's footsteps," political analyst Lao Mong Hay said.

"That the ruling party forced its way to getting final results confirmed and proceeded with opening of National Assembly regardless of petitions requesting the King to postpone opening parliament," has left many feeling conflicted about the monarchy, he said.

Though the King was simply fulfilling his legal role in convening parliament, Mr. Mong Hay said that the King could have exerted moral authority in the situation, like his father had done before by threatening to step down, or at least announcing that he would not open parliament.

"The same way as our royal father [Sihanouk]. There is a precedent. Why not use that precedent?" Mr. Mong Hay asked.

The late King Father Sihanouk was a singular figure in Cambodian society and politics, and the expectation by opposition politicians and their supporters that his son could exert similar influence in the political realm is mistaken, said Prince Sisowath Thomico, a longtime advisor in King Father Sihanouk's cabinet who unsuccessfully ran as a CNRP candidate for parliament in Preah Sihanouk province.

"In society we still have in mind the role played by Sihanouk, but it will never happen again in Cambodia, an absolute king who has power," Prince Thomico said, adding that the monarchy needed to be "modernized" so that it is not drawn into partisan matters.

"That is his [King Sihamoni's] wish. He doesn't want to take sides. He doesn't want to get involved in politics. That's a message I gave to the CNRP and CPP: leave the King alone," Prince Thomico said.

The CNRP, however, officially appealed to the King in September to delay convening the National Assembly until a political deal had been brokered between the CPP and CNRP, and even gathered thousands of their supporters thumbprints on petitions delivered to the Royal Palace.

King Sihamoni's decision not to delay parliament was also a matter of "realpolitik," Prince Thomico said.

"The CPP controls the military and the police and has all the power, so how would you want the King and Queen [Mother Norodom Monineath] to act? Would the monarchy be ready to take the responsibility for bloodshed?" Prince Thomico said.

"What are the options left to the King to oppose the CPP?" he asked.

The role of the King as arbiter of political disputes will no longer be necessary when there is a proper role for an opposition party within the National Assembly, Prince Thomico added.

"We will be able to modernize the monarchy when the opposition can play its role as an opposition party. When [the opposition] can express its voice in parliament. When we can censor the government and ministers and when we have proper powers," he said.

During his second reign, King Sihanouk also set a precedent for how a monarch can maintain a presence in the political arena, much to the ire of government leaders, particularly Mr. Hun Sen.

After the killing of union leader Chea Vichea in 2004, King Sihanouk declared that the murder was “undeniably political” as the government fought off similar accusations from fellow union leaders and human rights activists. Through his monthly bulletin, the King expressed his frustration with everything from corrupt management of the country’s ports to a spate of assassinations in the 2000s that many believed to be politically motivated.

In a public statement released in March 2003, King Sihanouk said he could no longer stay silent about the ills in Cambodian society. The King listed Cambodia’s “serious national problems” as territorial loss, deforestation, land-grabbing by the rich and powerful and the selling off of official decorations and honorifics.

“Under the pretext that the King ‘must not rule,’ I am accused of seeking to ‘rule’ by not shutting up about the mortal dangers that are pursuing Cambodia, its People, its Youth (the Future of our Nation) in the long term,” King Sihanouk wrote.

Using what many believed to be a pen name, King Sihanouk also created a platform for harsh criticism of Mr. Hun Sen’s administration through what he claimed to be a childhood friend, Ruom Ritt, who reportedly lived in the French Pyrenees mountains, but was a keen observer of Cambodian politics and often had his letters published in the King’s bulletin.

Ruom Ritt often lambasted Cambodia’s ruling elite and their uncaring attitude toward the country’s poor and powerless. After Mr. Hun Sen demanded that Ruom Ritt be silenced by King Sihanouk, the pen-pal wrote a parting letter in which he said he was deeply disappointed to have to stop writing the letters and hoped that Mr. Hun Sen would stop speaking out against King Sihanouk.

“My crime is to dare say and write...the honest truth about what is not working in Cambodia, in the context of its highest good and even vital interest of our nation.... I allow myself to wish you that our Great and [all powerful] Leader [Hun Sen] diminishes progressively the number of his famous outbursts toward you [King Sihanouk] in his long and admirable speeches,” Ruom Ritt wrote.

CNRP chief whip Son Chhay said that the opposition had in recent weeks simply called on the King to ensure that Cambodians, under his rule, had the right to a “liberal democracy and pluralism,” as outlined in the Constitution.

“I have to be careful when talking about the King because he is supposed to be protected, but I only suggest that he has a role to play. He ought to do so,” Mr. Chhay said.

Phay Siphan, a CPP secretary of state and spokesman for the Council of Ministers, said that by inaugurating the new National Assembly the King had fulfilled his constitutional obligations.

“The King attaches himself to the rule of law. He shows a very high respect in terms of rule of law...during the conflict between the CNRP and NEC as well as with the Constitutional Council,” he said, referring to the two state institutions that upheld the CPP’s election victory.

“That is what we call neutrality. Neutrality for the King is rule of law,” he said, adding that the CNRP, not the CPP government, had lobbied the King Sihamoni to take action outside of his constitutional mandate.

“The government never put any pressure to the King, only CNRP put pressure on [him], and a number of NGOs [which] don’t understand the law and the [need for the] King [to] act independently according to due process,” he said.

“The majority or minority cannot turn the law...no matter what color you are or political affiliation. The CNRP, they don’t respect the law, they don’t respect the King, they don’t respect institution,” Mr. Siphon added.

Regardless of the constitutionality of the new government, or what role King Sihamoni had in its forming, the institution of the monarchy must now find a way to remain relevant after the passing of the hugely powerful, and widely beloved, King Father Norodom Sihanouk, said Astrid Norén-Nilsson, who has studied Cambodia’s monarchy as a political scientist at the University of Cambridge.

“Before Sihanouk’s death, the looming threat of what it would signify was keenly felt by royal family members who were well aware that they had carried themselves merely as his derivatives,” she said in an email.

“Predictably, his death unmasked this void—the inability of royalists to come up with a new political project—and there is little prospect (although not outright inconceivable) that we will see such a project take shape in the years to come,” she said, adding that the monarchy had yet to put forth “an independent, credible, royalist plan and vision for where to take Cambodia...that is not limited to references to Sihanouk and the Sihanoukist legacy.”

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