

Southeast Asia

A testament

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Figure 13.1 On Cambodian–Vietnamese border, 9 August 1967

There was clearly evident some physical destruction (houses and a temple) with casualties reported on both sides. Assuming that both attacks had been made by troops of the South Vietnamese army, I was surprised to hear, through our interpreter, that the Cambodian soldiers who were accompanying us were discussing whether one of the attacking units might have been the Khmer Serei. This kindled my interest in this organization, and upon my return to Phnom Penh I devoted most of my time to learning more about it from various foreign embassies, from the UN's De Ribbing Mission (mandated by the United Nations to help resolve border disputes between Cambodia and Thailand and restore diplomatic relations between them),² and from members of the International Control Commission (ICC) for Cambodia.³

There was a striking common denominator of agreement among these sources. They all saw the Khmer Serei as an instrument of American policy, working in harmony with Thailand and South Vietnam, either to unseat Sihanouk or at least push him away from his neutralist course and align his international posture to conform more closely with that of the United States. They all saw this policy as running counter to a substantial tide of Cambodian nationalism with which, in the public eye, Sihanouk had become closely identified. In short, this external pressure on Sihanouk, most clearly manifest to the public in the destructive cross-border incursions of the Khmer Serei, was counterproductive to the objectives of the United

States and its two Southeast Asian allies. Within Cambodia there was widespread outrage at the suffering inflicted by the Khmer Serei's depredations that resulted in further legitimizing Sihanouk's leadership and strengthening his domestic political position.

Thus, much of the international community, including the ICC and Western embassies, were then opposed to the drift of US policy in supporting this anti-Sihanouk force under its leader, Son Ngoc Thanh. In view of the fact that the Australian embassy had been charged with representing American interests following the break in Cambodian-American diplomatic relations two years earlier, some of the views expressed by the Australian ambassador, Noel Deschamps, are particularly significant.⁴ He vouchsafed that most of the Khmer Serei had been recruited from the Khmer Krom in southern Vietnam "ostensibly" to fight against the Vietcong, but had then been transported by air or ship to Thailand where they became the major components of the Khmer Serei, with a considerably smaller number having been recruited from the Cambodian minority in eastern Thailand (Surin Province). In view of US allegations that Sihanouk had been unwilling to effectively contest alleged Vietnamese Communist penetration of Cambodia's eastern frontier, the ambassador was keenly incensed that of the Cambodian army's 17,500 actual combat troops (out of an overall total of at the most 35,000 men in the entire army) half were deployed along the Thai border in an attempt to block Khmer Serei incursions there. He asserted that the cross-border activities of Son Ngoc Thanh's Khmer Serei had over the previous two years considerably surpassed the earlier penetrations from South Vietnam.⁵

When M.K.L. Bindra, head of the ICC, invited me to look at the map in his "incident room" upon which each cross-border penetration of a military unit into Cambodia was indicated by a pin, I was astonished by the size of the cluster of bees depicted by the pins inside Cambodia's frontier with Thailand. There appeared to be at least three times as many as inside the frontier with South Vietnam. Both the ICC and the De Ribbing mission had concluded that, however extensive the role of the CIA in backing the Khmer Serei, it was now the US military that was playing the major role in supporting Khmer Serei actions across the frontier with South Vietnam. According to the ICC, these recent crossings from South Vietnam had been "undertaken on the responsibility of junior [American] officers below the rank of colonel," while the De Ribbing mission was explicit in charging that "the US army in Saigon supports these Khmer Serei operations into Cambodia," and endorsed reports that they were encadred by US special forces.⁶

After that first encounter I began to look more deeply into the history of the Khmer Serei which by 1967 had become such an instrument of US policy, and over the years I have had the opportunity to burrow in relevant American and British archives for further material. In the following pages, I have done my best to trace the roles of Son Ngoc Thanh and his Khmer

Serei in US policy towards Cambodia in the period from the Eisenhower administration through that of Nixon, and especially in the coup that removed Prince Norodom Sihanouk from power in early 1970 and paved the way for Nixon's reckless invasion of Cambodia at the end of April of that year, and its catastrophic consequences.

For approximately eight years after the end of World War II Son Ngoc Thanh was Cambodia's most popular nationalist leader, a fame that Cambodia's young king, Norodom Sihanouk, did not suffer gladly. Their rivalry became a major theme in Cambodia's internal politics, one that was encouraged and manipulated by the US with varying degrees of salience until Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh in 1975.

Born in 1908, Son Ngoc Thanh was a Khmer Krom (southern, or down-river, Khmer) from Tra-Vinh province in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, where there then lived close to a million ethnic Cambodians whose origin went back to the period when this area was part of the Cambodian kingdom. Thanks to his wealthy ethnically Cambodian father and Sino-Vietnamese mother, he acquired a French education, culminating with law school in Paris. Returning to Indochina in 1933, he worked for an initial year in the secretariat of the French colonial administration of Cochin China and tried unsuccessfully to enter the colonial civil service. While in Saigon he is reported to have become friendly with a small group of young liberally inclined minor French officials who helped him find employment in the National Library in Phnom Penh. There he worked closely with the strongly nationalistic Buddhist Institute of Cambodia, in the process becoming influential with the Buddhist clergy and emerging as secretary of the institute in 1935. He helped found, and claims to have become director of what, with a circulation of 5,000, was probably the most influential Cambodian nationalist weekly, the journal *Nagaravattaj*.

His initially cautious but increasingly assertive anti-French nationalism apparently found considerable support among the clergy and numerous civil servants. His close ties to an influential, strongly nationalist Buddhist monk whose incarceration sparked a large anti-French "monks' demonstration" on 20 July 1942, resulted in a French directive for Son Ngoc Thanh's arrest. Before this could be put into effect, he fled Phnom Penh and ultimately found refuge with Japanese officials in Bangkok, who agreed to send him to Japan, where he remained for almost three years.⁷

Several months before Son Ngoc Thanh's escape, the French administration in Cambodia had chosen a successor to the recently deceased Cambodian king, Sisowath Monivong. In doing so, they passed over more senior and experienced eligible members of the royal families and selected Norodom Sihanouk, whom they thought to be an unassertive and tractable 18-year-old boy from the Norodom, rather than Sisowath royal branch. Here it must be remembered that France in annexing Cambodia had maintained its monarchy, an institution they left shorn of all real power, but for

decades manipulated as a legitimizing symbol, behind which, until Japan's World War II occupation of the country, French authority was near absolute.

Until the final months of World War II the pro-Vichy French colonial administration in Indochina collaborated with Japan. Japanese troops were permitted to transit Cambodia into Thailand on their way to Malaya and Burma, but only a small number were actually stationed in Cambodia, beginning in late May 1941. The exercise of Japanese authority remained limited and generally yielded place to that of the French colonial administration until March 1945, when, in a sudden coup, simultaneously executed in Laos and Vietnam, the Japanese ousted French officials and took over full control.

Son Ngoc Thanh remained in Japan until after its government ended its entente with the French in March 1945 and ordered King Sihanouk to declare Cambodia's independence. In returning Son Ngoc Thanh to Cambodia in May, the Japanese were clearly hoping to take advantage of his anti-French nationalism. They initially had Sihanouk, who apparently himself also perceived Thanh as useful in securing support from the Buddhist clergy, appoint him foreign minister in the new Cambodian government that they sponsored, and ultimately prime minister on 13 August, in the final days of their control.

Apart from its anti-French stance, Son Ngoc Thanh's program at the time was apparently not radical and, according to David Chandler, "involved supporting the king, the royal family, and the [Buddhist] monastic order."⁸ From the standpoint of the anti-Vichy pro-Gaullist French who arrived two months after the end of the war, Son Ngoc Thanh's major error was probably to seek diplomatic recognition not only from Thailand (which during the war, with Japan's support, had annexed most of Cambodia's northern provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap) but also Ho Chi Minh's newly established Vietnam government. On 15 October 1945, France's General Leclerc, backed by a contingent of British/Indian troops from General Douglas Gracey's recently installed command in Saigon, flew to Phnom Penh, seized Prime Minister Son Ngoc Thanh and deposited him in a Saigon jail.

Many of Thanh's followers then joined the major anti-French maquis, the Khmer Issarak (Independent Cambodia) movement. Among that Thai-supported and somewhat splintered group probably the most important commander was Dap Chhuon, a man of some charisma who was reported to lead more than a thousand troops. Dap Chhuon's major base was in Cambodia's Siem Reap province, which Thailand returned, together with Battambang, to French-controlled Cambodia in 1946.

Though they sentenced Son Ngoc Thanh to twenty years in prison, the French soon discovered that he was such a redoubtable nationalist symbol that in 1947 they found it wise to get him out of Indochina and sent him into exile in France under the rubric of "administrative detention."⁹ Four

years later, in late October 1951, just a month after Cambodian elections in which the strongly pro-Son Ngoc Thanh Democratic Party had again emerged as by far the strongest party, the French, at Sihanouk's urging, permitted Thanh to return to Phnom Penh to a popular welcome so tumultuous that the French dared not interfere. Sihanouk, who had urged the French to permit Thanh to return, may have expected that this gesture would, as Michael Leifer believes, "conciliate opponents of the throne."¹⁰ Or, as David Chandler suggests, he may have expected that Thanh's popularity could be exploited "to lever concessions from the French," and that his presence would split what had emerged as the country's largest political organization, the strongly nationalist Democratic Party,¹¹ or at least moderate its increasingly anti-royalist orientation.

Whatever his calculations, both he and the French soon realized their error, for Son Ngoc Thanh, buoyed by the strength of his evident popular support, almost immediately manifested as strong an anti-French nationalism as he had shown before his arrest and exile. He publicly called for full independence, asserting that this was not possible with the continuing presence of French troops, and in January 1952 he established a newspaper that was forthright in hewing to this line. His position clearly contrasted with the relatively weak gradualist and accommodationist nationalist goals pursued by Sihanouk in dealing with French authority. By early March 1952 Son Ngoc Thanh's clearly successful efforts to arouse public opinion had exceeded the limits of French tolerance. They shut down his paper, and he fled Phnom Penh with a small group of supporters to join a group of Khmer Issarak operating in Siem Reap province near the Thai frontier. There he broadcast by radio that he was leading the resistance against French rule, and his call now had a pro-republican and moderately anti-royalist character.

As Michael Leifer has observed, Thanh's flight "increased the differences between the King and all those who desired genuine independence." It had made Sihanouk "uncomfortably aware that the people had come to view his gradualist approach to the question of independence as a sacrifice of national rights."¹² Sihanouk now moved rapidly to align himself with the strong current of anti-French nationalism. His hand was considerably strengthened by the over-extension of French troops in Cambodia, who were assigned not primarily to fight the Khmer Issarak but to contain the operations of augmented numbers of Vietminh troops there. (Indeed, it had been the calculated strategy of General Giap to challenge French forces in Cambodia in order to draw them away from Vietnam.) By mid-1952 the French realized that if they were to have much chance of prevailing in Vietnam, a far more important place for them than the other two Indochina states, they would have to draw back most of the troops that had become tied down in the much less crucial Cambodian operation. Sihanouk was astute enough to realize that, with their forces already well-overextended in fighting the Vietminh in both Vietnam and Laos, the French could ill afford

to keep sufficient troops in his country to maintain control if he were to rally Cambodian royalist nationalists to join the Khmer Issarak in a common effort against the French occupation. And thus, to insure a more friendly Cambodia on their western flank in Vietnam, the French were increasingly obliged to appease Sihanouk in his newly charged nationalist aspirations.

Holding this strong card and now more fully awakened to the power of Cambodian nationalism, Sihanouk soon took an increasingly confrontational position with the French. But initially he enlisted their help in what Chandler terms “a pincer movement against the Democrats,”¹³ the dominant strongly pro-Son Ngoc Thanh political party some of whose leaders had a year earlier formed the cabinet. The speedy dispatch of substantial French troop reinforcements to Phnom Penh enabled Sihanouk to defy parliament and stage a coup ending its power and that of its cabinet. With French troops surrounding the parliament building, he was able to take over as prime minister and appoint a non-Democrat cabinet. Chandler suggests that “The French probably thought that after they had helped him sweep the Democrats aside, he would abide by their glacial timetable for relinquishing control.”¹⁴ But no sooner had he seized power than he broadcast a message committing himself to the achievement of independence within three years. However skeptical the French may have been, he meant to fulfill this commitment, and he was to succeed.

Seven months later, in February of 1953, Sihanouk embarked on what he later termed his “Royal Crusade” to attain this goal of independence. He was helped by the increasingly desperate straits in which France found herself in Vietnam, but as he later bitterly recalled, he received no encouragement from the United States. American policy was still firmly behind the French in Indochina, and sought to do what it could to ensure that the Vietminh would not overcome them. When Sihanouk arrived in Washington in April, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles disappointed and antagonized him by insisting that the defeat of the Vietminh took precedence over Cambodian independence. Only after “the menace of Communism is dispelled in your country,” Dulles advised him, would the United States undertake “to induce France to recognize your complete and total independence and sovereignty.” Differences with France, Dulles lectured, would “only serve the cause of our common enemy.”¹⁵ Altogether Sihanouk’s 1953 visit to the United States was not a happy one, and Chandler observes that during it his “dislike of the Americans hardened into a conviction that the United States and its policies were inimical to him.”¹⁶

Despite the lack of support from foreign states, including Thailand, Sihanouk steadfastly persevered with his crusade and, benefiting from the Vietminh’s mounting successes against France, finally, beginning in August 1953, secured a series of concessions from the war-weary French, culminating in full independence that November.

In the spring of 1954 Sihanouk’s alienation from the United States was