

Cambodians Ever Wary: Of Thais and Vietnamese

Preventing Cambodia from being subjugated by her stronger neighbors has been the central preoccupation of her leaders since the decline of the Khmer empire, the forerunner of present-day Cambodia, in the 13th century.

Much like Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian king practiced a policy of playing off their stronger neighbors against each other, first siding with the Thais and then with the Vietnamese.

And when this policy failed, as in 1840 when the Vietnamese removed the Cambodian Government to Saigon and tried to tax Cambodian peasants, spontaneous demonstrations broke out against the Vietnamese, forcing them to withdraw.

A few years later the Cambodian king wrote to Napoleon II of France requesting his protection and assistance against the Vietnamese, a move that foreshadowed Prince Sihanouk's often repeated statements that he would prefer Chinese Communist to Vietnamese Communist rule.

Present-day Cambodia, with a population of seven million and an area of 67,000 square miles, about the size of Oklahoma, traces her history back to the kingdom of Funan in the first century. Unlike the Thais and Vietnamese, who are related to the Chinese, the Cambodians, or Khmers, are ethnically and linguistically related to the Indians.

Indian Cultural Influences

Throughout the first millennium the Cambodians were subjected to the influence of Indian culture, particularly the idea of a god-king. Gradually they developed the Khmer empire, with a system of authority based on the control of water distribution and the religious mythology of a god-king.

The empire reached its height in the twelfth century under Jayavarman VII, who built the great temples at Angkor Wat. But his extravagant construction projects and military expeditions, which extended Khmer rule over parts of what are now Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Malaya, emptied the royal treasury and wore out the peasants.

Water control, critical in a country where the vast majority of the people live along waterways that have seasonal flooding, was neglected and the empire gradually collapsed.

Large areas were taken over by Thai and Vietnamese settlers, including, for example, almost all of what is now South Vietnam.

Hostility toward their neighbors is an intense traditional sentiment. In 1864, the Cambodian king accepted the status of a French protectorate rather than continue to face the danger of annexation by the Vietnamese.

Although the French did little to develop Cambodia's economy or to advance the educational system, the Cambodians were grateful because they felt that the French had preserved their independence.

Was King for 14 Years

Prince Sihanouk, who he was king from 1941 until he abdicated in 1955, led his country's gradual struggle for independence. At first he was cautious.

"We must look the facts in the face," he said in 1947. "We are too poor to support or defend ourselves. We are dependent upon some major power to give us technicians and troops. If not France, it would be some other great nation."

Few Cambodians joined the Vietminh, the Communist-led guerrillas who were fighting the French, probably because of their traditional antipathy for the Vietnamese.

But in 1953, Prince Sihanouk pushed for complete independ-

ence and, after he went into exile briefly and caused a political crisis in Phnompenh, the French acceded to his demand. Prince Sihanouk returned in triumph, a popular hero.

Despite his abdication, most of the conservative peasantry continue to look on him as a god-king. He calls his people his "children," and they have always expressed deep loyalty and reverence for him.

Since the 35,000-man Cambodian army is largely made up of men of peasant background, the Prince may therefore still be able to count on some support from the military.

Under the Cambodian system of Government, established

after independence, there is a National Assembly, elected by universal suffrage, which appoints the Premier and Chief of State. The Popular Socialist Community, the political party headed by Prince Sihanouk, has won every seat it has contested in the National Assembly.

From the beginning of his tenure, Prince Sihanouk, who was born in 1922, has been faced with Cambodia's traditional problem of fending off stronger neighbors.

At first he accepted American aid, which helped to supply his army and build roads and factories, but he gradually turned to the Communist world, unhappy over American attempts to influence him and mindful of the Communists' growing power in Southeast Asia.

In the early years of the war in South Vietnam, he appeared to be convinced that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese would win a quick victory, and that the Americans would be forced out of Southeast Asia, leaving him with the Communists as neighbors.

It was for these reasons, observers believe, that Prince Sihanouk broke off diplomatic relations with the United States in 1965 and permitted North Vietnamese troops on his country's soil without complaint. Until 1969, he denied their presence.

In the last two years there were signs that Prince Sihanouk might be beginning to swing back in the other direction. After Chinese in Phnompenh, Cambodia's tree-lined, quiet capital, had staged demonstrations in connection with the Cultural Revolution, he criticized Peking.

In 1969, after a tour of his eastern provinces when he was reportedly angered by a North Vietnamese Army patrol that stopped him from entering a Cambodia village, he publicly disclosed that there were North Vietnamese troops on Cambodian soil.

Shift Indicated in February

In February, in his French-language political monthly, *Le Sangkum*, he suggested that, much as he opposed it, the presence of the American "imperialists" in Vietnam was allowing Cambodia to survive.

Many foreign observers have attributed Prince Sihanouk's shifts to his mercurial temperament, and have pointed to his reputation as a playboy.

He has been known as a dapper dresser, a jazz saxophonist, a lover of fast cars and dancing girls. Recently he has also devoted considerable attention

to developing the Cambodian movie industry, writing, directing and playing the lead in several movies.

He has also come under criticism recently for Cambodia's sluggish economy, governmental corruption, and his cult of personality.

A Cambodian official complained to a recent visitor that "Prince Sihanouk would rather take a helicopter out to some village and present them with a new plow than do the hard homework necessary to plan real economic development."
