Norodom Sihanouk's wonderful, horrible life

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For more than a half-century, Dr. Milton Osborne was an observer of the wonderful, horrible life of Norodom Sihanouk, whose funeral ceremonies take place in Phnom Penh next week. Sihanouk died in Beijing in October, 61 years after he assumed the Cambodian throne for the first time upon being selected by the French colonial masters. Dr Osborne first met Sihanouk, then prince and prime minister, when he was a young Australian diplomat posted in Phnom Penh in 1959. Osborne then earned a PhD in history at Cornell, taught at the Australian National University and overseas universities, and worked for the United Nations along the Thai border during the early years of the Cambodian refugee crisis. From 1982 to 1993, he returned to government service as Head of the Asia Branch of the Office of National Assessments. He is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney.

Dr. Osborne is the author of many articles and ten books about Cambodia, the region and the Mekong River that are so well written they can be read with pleasure and benefit by people without advanced degrees in the social sciences. His newest book is *Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History*.

Published in 1994, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* is the definitive biography, though a smart publisher should order a new, updated edition that covers Sihanouk's second reign as king and final attempts to influence events in his homeland. Back in 1973–before the Khmer Rouge victory in the civil war–Dr. Osborne already made a persuasive case in *Politics and Power in Cambodia: the Sihanouk Years* that the prince's own economic policies and megalomaniac personality led to his deposition by coup d'état in 1970. On Sihanouk's death, he wrote this obituary for the Lowy Institute.

He was interviewed by email by journalist Susan Cunningham.

Q: Was Sihanouk really *that* charismatic?

MO: Sihanouk was one of the few people I have ever encountered who deserves to be described as charismatic. On an individual basis he radiated charm and for Cambodians in particular he had a striking capacity to enthral a crowd–for good or ill. Have a look at my account, pp.3-4 of the biography, for an account of the remarkable double act he and Sukarno performed in 1959 and which I was lucky enough to witness. But he could also 'work' a non-Cambodian crowd. So, at a *soiree dansante* in the palace which, again, I was lucky to attend, at around 1.30 am, and after the king and queen had left, he beamed at the rest of us and said, 'Well, their majesties have gone, and I suppose the rest of you can go too now, but I am going to play until dawn and I do hope you will stay.' And, of course we all did.

Q: Would this be an accurate way to view it? In his public life, I see Sihanouk as alienating ever wider circles of Cambodians. First, the Issaraks and others on the front lines of the independence struggle. Later, leftist and rightist politicians, students and teachers. Next, the Chinese commercial class, urban workers and Northeastern tribal peoples. Finally, the elite, the army and former associates like Son Sann, Lon Nol and Sirik Matak. You mention peasants having fond memories of Sihanouk but, from the mid-1950s on, Khmer communist radio must have harped on Sihanouk's extravagance, decadence in his movies, relatives' corruption and made comparisons with peasant poverty? Surely, many rural dwellers must have been persuaded by Sihanouk's radio broadcasts on behalf of the KR after 1970.

MO: One of the great difficulties for an analysis of Cambodia's modern history is the lack of any reliable polling on public opinion. As a result, and in addition to essentially anecdotal evidence, we are forced back on to a relatively small number of elections and referenda in pursuit of judgements and these in various ways are unreliable guides. For instance, the results of the 1955 referendum on Sihanouk's 'Royal Crusade', and the 1960 referendum on his policy of 'neutrality', were undoubtedly inflated in his favour, but probably reflected a general readiness to support him and his policies over alternatives. The 1966 parliamentary election, which resulted in a deeply conservative government, was heavily influenced by money, though it is notable that Khieu Samphan was re-elected despite efforts, backed by Sihanouk, to prevent this result.

But if I have difficulty in gauging just how much support people such as Son Ngoc Thanh and some of the Issaraks actually had once Cambodia had achieved independence. I believe it is clear that by the late 1960s there were segments of the population that had increasingly come to resent Sihanouk's rule and these include the groups you mention: the army; politicians who had depended on spin-offs from American aid, before it was terminated; the Chinese commercial community; and certainly a growing group of 'intellectuals', which included those who had a high school education and had found that there were no jobs available to them.

It is more difficult to be certain about the peasantry. That some were discontented is undoubtedly true, but it is hard to know just how many. I'm far from sure that propaganda from Khmer communist radio had a wide affect. And while we know that the communists in the rural areas used Sihanouk's films to present a picture of a corrupt Phnom Penh society, we simply don't know how many responded to this effort. I think Michael Vickery is right in suggesting that the most disadvantaged among rural Cambodians were likely to have responded to communist criticisms of the regime, but again we lack real evidence about numbers. At the same time, it seems the case that many peasants who joined the KR to fight against the Phnom Penh regime did so in response to the idea that they were fighting on Sihanouk's behalf.

Q: In a similar vein, re-reading the biography reminded me of how brutal Sihanouk was. And it's not as though he disguised his role in many of the killings. The way he crushed the 1967 Samlaut Rebellion–torching villages, the summary executions, severed heads as trophies–was straightout of the French rulebook, particularly the Nghe-Tinh Rebellion chapter. Though the survivor memoirs usually depict the Sihanouk and Lon Nol periods as an idyllic time, "paradise" even–Someth May's

excepted–even one of the rosy ones recalls that film screened at movie theatres of a rightist Sihanouk opponent being executed.

So it's hard to acknowledge but … Hun Sen has aterrible human rights record and it's getting worse. But for Cambodians that came of age before 1990, the past 15 years or so have to be the most peaceful, secure, prosperous time in memory, right? Hun Sen probably tolerates more dissent and criticism than Sihanouk did in the 1960s. Can you imagine Sihanouk allowing these pesky human rights groups and foreign NGOs to exist?

MO: Without overemphasising the point, it is important to note that Cambodia was never the 'Gentle Land' which formed part of the title of the Barron and Paul book. Many Cambodian folk tales are pretty gruesome in character, and violence did not arrive in Cambodia with the French protectorate. One thing is very clear, and that is the fact that the pre-colonial administration, whether at the court or at lower levels of authority in the provinces (governors and their subordinate officials) enforced their rule with often terrifying punishments: stamping of malefactors to death by elephants; placing convicted criminals in the ground, buried up to their heads, and then dragging ploughs over them; and of course routine decapitations.

Once the French came to Cambodia there is ample evidence of Norodom's readiness in the 19th century to use savage means to enforce his will and position, particularly if anyone infringed his rights over his female household. As I record in my *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia* (1969, 1997), when he heard of the French use of firing squads to execute people, he immediately embraced the idea to execute errant wives and their lovers.

What was striking about the efforts to suppress the Samlaut Rebellion and the subsequent spread of rural insurgency was the extent to which government brutality became so publicly acknowledged. Before that, violence visited upon dissenters was not part of public discussion, however much it might have been talked about behind closed doors.

I well remember being surprised when, in 1966, a Cambodian friend pointed out to me the building in Phnom Penh in which the security services tortured and killed those suspected of being threats to the state. If he, as an elite Cambodian, knew about it, no doubt many others were also aware of this building and what it was used for. But it was not something usually discussed with foreigners. And we shouldn't exaggerate the numbers killed or disappeared, however unpleasant or awful this fact of life actually was. After Samlaut matters changed and the vengeance of the state was made very public. As for the execution of the Khmer Serei rebels in 1964, yes, the filming of the execution and its being shown for a month in cinemas throughout the country did revolt many in the elite, but the extent to which it offended the peasantry is not something we can easily judge.

Your reluctant thought about life under Hun Sen is, I think, largely correct inasmuch as it applies to many in contemporary Cambodian elite circles. If one is part of the group that is benefiting from the government's current policies then it is unlikely you are much exercised by the authoritarian nature of the regime. Just because that regime is awful in many ways–and I think land grabbing is one of the worst aspects of the current regime–this does not

mean you are deeply concerned by Hun Sen's denunciation of NGOs, which as you rightly note are still able to function despite his displeasure. The Human Rights groups continue to operate; they just have to know how far it is possible to go without tipping over the edge of Hun Sen's 'tolerance'. Given all that has gone before, there is little reason for most urban Cambodians to resent the current regime. Outside observers can point to all of the things that are wrong with Cambodia, but this does not mean revolt, let alone rebellion and revolution, are around the corner–in any event, revolution is the last option for those who truly believe that change must be achieved.

And, as a final comment on this issue, it is worthwhile making the point that is so often forgotten in the criticism levelled against Hun Sen, the fact that he has shown himself to be a skilful politician. Authoritarian, yes; brutal on occasion in the pursuit of his goals, yes; but skilful too. I only quite recently was told by a fairly close associate that Hun Sen is a very capable chess player, which I find both interesting and revealing. And additionally, as I and others have pointed out, much of Hun Sen's behaviour is in the traditional manner of a Cambodia leader, not least the lengthy and earthy speeches which are an echo of what Sihanouk used to do.

Q: Maybe you could explain a little about Sihanouk's economic and social policies that cranked up the discontent by 1969. Foreigners probably have always looked at Sihanouk's reign through the war and foreign policy lens. I understand about controlling international trade, nationalizations, rice policies, but not the social policies. It made me start thinking about Hun Sen, in contrast. What is his economic philosophy? Could it be called crony capitalism? Let Chinese do the infrastructure and the Westerners do social programs? Given his political origins, he must have some populist and socialist tendencies.

MO: I don't have very much to add to your own sensible brief observations: Yes, it could certainly be called crony capitalism, with Cambodian characteristics. This is an issue which has been expertly analysed by Global Witness in their 'Family Trees' report. It's worth making the additional point that what is happening now has certain distinct similarities with what happened under Sihanouk. That is, link your fortunes to the leader and he will see that you are rewarded for doing so. (Part of the reason for Sihanouk's losing elite support was the fact that, after he rejected United States aid in 1963, the benefits that used to flow to the army, and others, disappeared.) I'm not sure this qualifies for the term 'economic philosophy', but it certainly works in practice. Just look at the economic benefits that have accrued to Deputy Prime Minister Sok An.

I'm not sure there is much point in looking for Hun Sen's 'populist and socialist' tendencies. His concern is power and the maintenance of it. It is ensuring that his family and supporters grow rich in the process that cements his position.

Q: Stuck in my memory from your *Southeast Asia – An Introductory History*: in the late 1930s, on the opening of the first senior high school for "natives," Lycée Sisowath, there were fewer than 12 Cambodians with the equivalent of a high school diploma (Sihanouk not among them). Sihanouk initiated a massive schooling drive in the 1950s. By the early 1960s, there were more literate Cambodians and more

teachers, doctors, clerks, etc. than in all the preceding centuries put together. Along the way, this young generation acquired rising expectations for jobs and political participation.

I've heard it compared to the present situation: surplus of educated people plus not enough jobs equals a restive population. It's hard to miss the law graduates driving taxis, motorcycle taxi drivers and lowly hotel staffers that studied English for three years, English speakers now studying Chinese and Thai. On the plus side, many now have studied more practical subjects than in the earlier time. Do you see a Khmer entrepreneurial class rising?

MO: Sihanouk's promotion of education was a mixed and less than thought-through set of policies. It was indeed the case that there were only about a dozen Cambodians who had qualified at the baccalaureate level at the end of the 1930s, but the rush to promote education after independence took little account of (a) the lack of qualified teachers (b) the dangers of expansion of high schools and tertiary institutions without those qualified teachers, and (c) the lack of jobs for those graduating, even if they were genuinely qualified as the result of their education. Charles Meyer is a very useful commentator on this issue in his *Derrière Le Sourire Khmer* (*Behind the Khmer Smile)*, pages 162-65. And I addressed the matter anecdotally in *Before Kampuchea* in relation to my travel to Pailin in 1966 (Chapter 4).

As for the current situation, it certainly is the case that many of the so-called graduates of tertiary institutions are not really qualified to do any job that demands real skills, while others that are qualified–your taxi drivers with law degrees–can't find jobs to match their qualifications. Do I see a Khmer entrepreneurial class emerging? Well, yes, to a degree, with the likelihood that it will be marked in character by being heavily Sino-Khmer in composition.

The second part of the interview is available here.