

## The monarchy's future public role: *to reign but not to rule?*

Cambodia's monarchy has undergone many changes over the years, with the 'universal sovereigns' and 'absolute rulers' of the past giving way more recently to King Sihanouk's 'constitutional monarchy.' Even though his formal political role has been reduced, Sihanouk remains a powerful and stabilising force in Cambodian political life and has been regularly called upon by both Cambodia's politicians and international leaders to resolve recent crises. Sihanouk's role in promoting the negotiations which culminated in the 1991 Paris agreements was decisive. Following both the 1993 and the 1998 elections, he was prevailed upon to resolve the political deadlock over the formation of the new government.

### **The monarchy rejected**

At the same time, however, the monarchy has often been perceived as a threat by Cambodia's political strongmen. Repeated efforts have been made to eliminate it, starting with King Sihanouk's overthrow in 1970 by his own government, again during the Khmer Rouge era when Sihanouk was under house arrest, and in the 1980s when the ruling State of Cambodia regime resisted efforts by armed groups, including the royalist faction founded by Sihanouk, to overthrow it.

Even though reinstated as King in 1993, Sihanouk has since been politically marginalised. Second Prime Minister Hun Sen and other anti-royalists often criticise him for interfering in government activities, while others interpret his reluctance to exercise his full constitutional powers as a sign of weakness. Other members of the royal family — Prince Ranariddh, Prince Chakrapong — Ranariddh's half-brother and Prince Sirivudh - the former Foreign Minister—have also suffered political hardship and humiliation at the hands of Hun Sen, resulting in at least temporary exile from Cambodia. This has been viewed publicly as a campaign to discredit the royal family and to keep it out of politics.

### **Competing schools of thought**

One view of the monarchy is of an antiquated irrelevant part of political life. Proponents of this view want a purely democratic form of government where state affairs are run by elected institutions rather than individuals or privileged groups; all citizens should have equal access to top leadership positions. Moreover, it is argued that rural people remain loyal to the monarchy largely through ignorance and should be educated in the

virtues of republicanism. The 1970 coup essentially emerged from the discontent of republicans and intellectuals who accused Sihanouk of autocratically handling state affairs and suppressing dissent by force.

The second school of thought argues that the majority of Cambodians still believe in the monarchy and that to abruptly break the ties between them and the monarchy would prove destabilising. The people look on Sihanouk, who led Cambodia to independence, as a patriotic leader and the 'father' of the nation. Despite the on-going campaign against the monarchy, public polls indicate that the King remains the most popular Cambodian political personality. Out of respect for the people's will, therefore, Cambodia is likely to remain a constitutional monarchy with the King as head of state.

### **A non-political role?**

If the monarchy is to be retained as the majority wish, certain constitutional articles should be amended to reflect contemporary Cambodian realities. First, many feel that for the monarchy to unify the nation, it requires the respect of all concerned parties. Therefore, it should not get involved in political power struggles or in formal party politics.

Second, succession procedures should be clarified. A crown prince or princess (there is a strong case for women to be allowed into the royal line) should be identified far enough in advance to allow for the grooming of new monarchs and to prepare the people psychologically. Moreover, the title 'Monarch for Life,' as employed in the Constitution, should be modified to allow a monarch to abdicate if he or she should wish. In July 1997, Hun Sen rejected the King's wish to abdicate in protest at Prince Ranariddh's violent overthrow, accusing Sihanouk of insubordination before the supreme law of the land.

As the next millennium approaches, Cambodia's monarchy has a potentially crucial role to play in unifying the nation and promoting peace. For this to come about, however, it needs a clear vision and purpose and must itself adopt a proactive attitude towards reform and adapt to present-day realities. However, it is the Monarchy's very intimacy with Cambodian politics today, which poses the biggest challenge, as it seeks to define a new, more independent role for itself. ■

deeds of Cambodia's leaders have not matched their words. They pledged not to use violence to settle disputes, but have done so. They promised free and fair elections, but have not respected the will of the people. And to appease and divert attention from the real issues at stake, they have launched populist campaigns to liberalise laws on gambling, drinking and prostitution.

### A 'social' check on power?

The mixed messages Cambodians are getting from their leaders have left many in a quandary. Cambodians are all too aware that, in the past, backward attitudes have carried their country to the brink of ruin. At present, this is stifling both social progress and economic development, the benefits of which many Cambodians have become accustomed to in recent years. Yet as they seek to push for political change, they are constrained by apathy, a lack of knowledge about how to act and social norms which do not encourage questioning of the status quo.

Following UNTAC's departure in 1993, a great burden was placed on Cambodia's young civil society to safeguard the fledgling democracy. Cambodia has little tradition of civil associations, however, and despite the recent proliferation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in human rights monitoring and democracy education, the ability of civil society to 'discipline' the government remains limited. Though many civil associations embody and practise democratic values through their activities at a grass-roots level, civil society initiatives fall far short of the unity or the influence needed to ensure that the state upholds these values.

To conduct advocacy and represent people's interests with any real influence requires a certain autonomy which, as the case of the press shows (See box overleaf), is still very limited. Many NGOs still rely heavily on international groups, or the government itself, for both funding and technical expertise. Though the government has been relatively tolerant of NGO activities in recent years, restrictive legis-

lation under consideration during 1998 would reduce NGO freedom dramatically if adopted.

Moreover, even though political activism is increasing, many Cambodians are still content to accept the status quo or lack options to challenge it in the context of the extreme political and economic uncertainty gripping the country. Cambodians have become increasingly conscious of being poor or powerless, either inside or outside the ranks of the powerful and privileged. As a consequence, they are torn between acquiescence and action, between the urge to move up in the ranks of the privileged and protect personal or family interests and the moral obligation to challenge perceived injustices.

### The risks of democratic tyranny

There is growing popular awareness in Cambodia today, as demonstrated by the public demonstrations following the 1998 elections, that direct action can lead to political change. Yet it is also clear that for political change to be meaningful and sustainable, a simple change in government is not enough. The conservative values underlying Cambodian politics must also give way to a more constructive emphasis on dialogue, compromise and mutual gain. In the absence of progress, democracy in Cambodia risks being simply a cover for a continuation of personalised rule and the abuse of power.

Cambodia's leaders can no longer hide behind the language of democracy and must realise that their people are more politically aware than ever before in their history. They realise that genuine democracy is not simply about how a government is elected, but about its goals. These must include a more competent and independent judiciary, greater equality before the law for all citizens, and the protection of constitutional freedoms and liberties. These goals are the yardstick by which Cambodia's people will henceforth measure their political leaders. Pursuing these goals is also the only way to consolidate Cambodia's fragile peace. ■