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Man of influence: King Norodom Sihanouk prays during a Buddhist ceremony at Wat Mony Prasittivong, outside Phnom Penh, in 1995. AFP

A unifying figure has gone

Comment
Khamboly Dy

FOR MANY Cambodians, the death of revered King Father Norodom Sihanouk was a great national loss. As one woman from Kampong Chhnang remarked, "His death is like the loss of a parent, leaving the whole family with no comfort."

For better or worse, the King Father's absence marks a historic turning point in Cambodian politics.

The Kingdom has endured prolonged civil war, aerial bombardment, genocide, political conflict, violence and foreign interference, all of which have shaped its culture.

Twenty-two years into the post-conflict transitional period, the King Father's death presents another important test for Cambodian unity, political stability, sustainable peace and national reconciliation.

On Monday, Cambodians bade their last farewell to the man who was presumably their last God King.

Although tens of thousands of people flocked into the park in front of the Royal Palace and the surrounding areas, for security reasons they were not allowed to come close to Preah Meru field, where the King Father's body was laid for cremation.

Instead, some people sat on the road praying for the King Father. Others wandered the streets.

A group of students from Tuol Svay Prey High School collected rubbish from the road, and other voluntary groups offered food and water to villagers from far-off provinces.

A sign on the back of the students' shirts read: "I will not allow the country of the King Father have rubbish because of me."

"Following the King Father's advice, we will strive to study so that Cambodia is well-known on the international stage."

"The King Father's wish is that Cambodian children unite to develop the country."

These simple slogans and voluntary tasks symbolise the extraordinary sense of unity the King Father

sought to inspire in all Cambodians.

There were mixed responses to the question, "What will the future of Cambodia be without the King Father?"

One monk from Siem Reap, who had been in Phnom Penh for the previous four days to witness this historic ceremony, made the observation that the King Father was not only the most influential political figure in Cambodian history but also the most experienced diplomat.

He spoke of the King Father's good relations with many statesmen and national leaders, which made him an important figure.

The mere presence of the King Father, if he were still alive, would bring respect to Cambodia, the monk said.

Norodom Sihanouk was able to gain the sympathy and respect of many world leaders, well beyond his retirement from political office in 2004 and his abdication in favour of his son, the current King, His Majesty Norodom Sihamoni.

A taxi driver from Takeo said he

had felt more grief at the death of the King Father than even at the deaths of his own parents.

He described how the King Father was highly respected in many countries, even though at home there were people who didn't like him.

The taxi driver estimated that only about two per cent of Cambodians had less respect for the King Father, and this attitude was primarily based on his controversial relationship with the Khmer Rouge.

For him, the King Father was an enduring symbol of peace and unity. He remarked that the King Father's mere presence could unite his children to be kind to one another and pursue peace.

Before leaving, the taxi driver remarked: "If we have unity, no country will dare look down on us and our nation will be developed."

His comment echoes the King Father's final wish: for a Cambodia united in purpose and spirit.

Khamboly Dy, of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, is the author of A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979).



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