

The Death of Cambodia's Nimble Prince
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October 15, 2012

In the end, even God-kings die

People mourn, especially the little people in the kleptocracy that Cambodia has become under the clique of mainly former Khmer Rouge apparatchiks who control the state these days, and push the poorer people off their lands to sell 99-year leases to grasping Chinese, Russian and South Korean concerns.

King Norodom Sihanouk, the irrepressible descendant of the god-kings of Angkor, and for decades one of the world's most resilient – and some would say most exasperating – politicians, died Monday, the day of the dead in Cambodia, and just two weeks short of his 90th birthday.

Never again will a correspondent sit, as I did several times, in the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, and listen to the former monarch, father of the reigning King Sihamoni, while sipping lukewarm champagne served by granite-faced North Korean bodyguards, as one attempted to avoid the attentions of the king's pet lap-dog, Mickie, who sometimes got irritated at visitors.

Who else in the world could recall such conversations as King Sihanouk did in my last interview with him: "Chairman Mao looked at me and said: 'My dear Prince Sihanouk, please read this Little Red Book of mine.'"

He also told me of the waspish exchanges he had had with Henry Kissinger, the then US Secretary of State. No love was lost between the two men. It was Kissinger and Nixon, after all, who orchestrated the secret bombing of Cambodia, which helped, in my mind, to turn the Khmer Rouge into the murdering automatons that they became.

When I last sat in the palace for such an exclusive interview – it lasted 2 hours and 20 minutes of hilarious mirth, fury, good sense and potted history – he told me about an earlier period of medical treatment in China. "Now I am fine, and if we were in Haiti, we would say it was voodoo."

"Maybe you really are a God-king," I ventured in jest. "No, no," the king insisted. Yet he recalled that Queen Monineath, his elegant consort and fifth wife, had visited a benighted province stricken by drought. "Please ask the king to send us rain," villagers beseeched her.

The king sighed: "I am not a god, I cannot persuade the sky to give us rain. It's not good to be thought a God-king: it's terrible, terrible."

Still, two days later it rained on that village.

One British ambassador told me he felt privileged to attend such sessions of royal wit and wisdom. "I hold the king in high esteem," he told me. He talks a lot of sense. I get a huge buzz just sitting listening to him. He's living history.

Sihanouk was also always a royal 'press groupie' who enjoyed the company of journalists. The late king had been one of the last survivors among luminaries like Jawaharlal Nehru, Josip Broz Tito, Gamel Abdel Nasser and Sukarno, who co-founded the Non-aligned Movement in the mid-50s at Bandung, Indonesia.

He had known four generations of Chinese leaders and would soon have been getting ready to know a fifth, if mortality had not interceded.

He became king at age 18 because France thought this plump, chortling youth would be easy to manipulate. The French were part of a long line of states and people who underestimated him. It was the French who had to leave quietly with their tails between their legs in 1953, the year before neighboring Vietnam won independence at the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

Sihanouk had the foresight to leave behind a good king to succeed him. He is King Sihamoni, now 58, the only son Sihanouk and Queen Monineath, who studied ballet dancing in the former Czechoslovakia.

Sihamoni, a former Cambodian ambassador to UNESCO, was reluctant to take the post, enjoying his life and friends in Paris. Sihamoni is unmarried, and Sihanouk once told the Cambodian population that his son, one of 14 offspring, 'regards women as his sisters.'

Sihanouk himself supported same sex marriage. I am not gay, but I respect the rights of gays and lesbians,"he said. It's not their fault if God makes them born that way."

In a later interview with the new King Sihamoni, the monarch told me: "The reality is that I don't feel in the least like a king, far less a god-king."

"I feel just like an ordinary human being, at most a *fonctionnaire*, whose duty is to serve all the people Inside I haven't changed. I am still me."

These days, the hardline prime minister Hun Sen, installed in power by the Vietnamese army, rules the roost, and he has forbidden Sihamoni to give interviews, as he also latterly forbade the late Sihanouk.

Hun Sen belongs to the former 'Soviet-Vietnamese' faction of the Khmer Rouge, while the pro-Chinese faction, headed by former Khmer Rouge leaders Noun Chea and Khieu

Samphan' has been under trial at the Khmer Rouge tribunal in Phnom Penh.

It remains to be seen how Sihamoni manages, though he has the assistance of his mother, Queen Monineath, Sihanouk's bereaved wife.

Sihanouk has critics who say that he ran an autocratic one-man show in the 1960s, while his backing of the Khmer Rouge from exile in Beijing, after his 1970 overthrow, brought 1.7 million deaths.

But older Cambodians recalled a "golden age" under Sihanouk before American bombing, Khmer Rouge mass murder and Vietnamese invasion devastated Cambodia.

The opposition politician Sam Rainsy says Sihanouk will 'probably be the last of Cambodia's great kings."

In his last interview with me, Sihanouk spoke of his legacy. "I have no remorse. I always did everything in the highest interests of my nation. My conscience is clear."