



## **Cambodia's Former King Norodom Sihanouk Dies at 89**

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Norodom Sihanouk, the revered former king who was a towering figure in Cambodian politics through a half-century of war, genocide and upheaval, died Monday. He was 89. Sihanouk abdicated the throne in 2004, citing his poor health. He had been getting medical treatment in China since January and had suffered a variety of illnesses, including colon cancer, diabetes and hypertension.

Prince Sisowath Thomico, a royal family member who also was Sihanouk's assistant, said the former king suffered a heart attack at a Beijing hospital.

"His death was a great loss to Cambodia," Thomico said, adding that Sihanouk had dedicated his life "for the sake of his entire nation, country and for the Cambodian people."

Sihanouk's successor, Norodom Sihamoni, flew with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to Beijing on Monday to retrieve the body, said Col. Chhay Bunna, a senior police officer in charge of security at Phnom Penh's international airport.

State flags flew at half-staff, and Cambodian government spokesman Khieu Kanharith said an official funeral will be held once the former king's body is repatriated.

In January, Sihanouk requested that he be cremated in the Cambodian and Buddhist tradition, asking that his ashes be put in an urn, preferably made of gold, and placed in a stupa at the country's Royal Palace.

Sihanouk saw Cambodia transform from colony to kingdom, U.S.-backed regime to Khmer Rouge killing field and foreign-occupied land to guerrilla war zone — and finally to a fragile experiment with democracy.

He was a feudal-style monarch who called himself a democrat. He was beloved by his people but was seldom able to deliver the stability they craved through decades of violence.

Born on Oct. 31, 1922, Sihanouk enjoyed a pampered childhood in French colonial Indochina.

In 1941, the French crowned 19-year-old Sihanouk rather than relatives closer in line to the throne, thinking the pudgy, giggling prince would be easy to control. They were the first of many to underestimate him, and by 1953 the French were out.

Two years later, Sihanouk stepped down from the throne, organized a mass political party and steered Cambodia toward uneasy neutrality at the height of the Cold War.

Sihanouk accepted limited U.S. aid and nurtured relations with Communist China. He was also a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Sihanouk was a ruthless politician, talented dilettante and tireless playboy, caught up in endless, almost childlike enthusiasms.

He made movies, painted, composed music, fielded a palace soccer team and led his own jazz band. His large appetite extended to fast cars, food and women. He married at least five times — some say six — and fathered 14 children.

After 1960, Sihanouk drifted toward the communist camp, seeking assurances from his powerful neighbors, China and Vietnam, that his country's neutrality would be respected. In 1965, Sihanouk broke off relations with Washington as U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War shifted into high gear. But by 1969, worried about increasing Vietnamese communist use of Cambodian soil, he made new overtures to the United States and turned against China.

Sihanouk's top priority was to keep Cambodia out of the war, but he could not. U.S. aircraft bombed Vietnamese communist sanctuaries in Cambodia with increasing regularity, and his protests were ignored.

Internally, Cambodia was a one-man show. Sihanouk's sharpest critics accused him of running a medieval state as an ancient Khmer ruler reincarnated in Western dress. "I am Sihanouk," he once said, "and all Cambodians are my children."

Nonetheless, the country was at relative peace and some attempts were made to better the life of the peasants, who adored Sihanouk as a near-deity.

Outsiders saw a country of shimmering temples and emerald green rice fields that seemed a chapter from an Oriental fairy tale. But that face of Cambodia would soon vanish. In 1970, a U.S.-backed coup sent the prince to Beijing for years of lonely, if lavish, exile. Within weeks, war broke out, beginning a systematic destruction of Cambodia that killed millions and impoverished the survivors.

Sihanouk, seeking to regain the throne, joined the Khmer Rouge-dominated rebels after his overthrow. They had numbered only a few hundred until then, but his presence gave them a legitimacy they had never before enjoyed.

The alliance left Sihanouk open to subsequent criticism that he opened the way for the Khmer Rouge holocaust. But his relations with the rebels were always strained.

"The Khmer Rouge do not like me at all, and I know that. Ooh, la, la ... It is clear to me," he said in a 1973 interview. "When they no longer need me, they will spit me out like a cherry pit."

When the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975 and Sihanouk returned home, they detained him and ordered his execution. Only the personal intervention of Chinese leader Zhou Enlai saved him.

With Sihanouk under house arrest in the Royal Palace, the Khmer Rouge ran an ultra-radical Maoist regime from 1975 to 1979, emptying the cities to create a vast forced labor camp. An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians were executed or died of disease and hunger under their rule.

Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978 and toppled the Khmer Rouge a few weeks later. Freed as the Vietnamese advanced on Phnom Penh, Sihanouk found exile in Beijing and North Korea.

From there, he headed an unlikely coalition of three guerrilla groups fighting the Vietnamese-installed puppet government. The war lasted a decade.

In a mix of politics and theater — bringing his French poodle to negotiations, singing love songs over elaborate dinners — Sihanouk engineered a cease-fire and moves toward national unity and peace.

Sihanouk headed the U. N.-supported interim structure that ran Cambodia until the 1993 elections, lending his prestige to attempts to unite Cambodia's factions.

The election was won by the royalist FUNCINPEC party of Sihanouk's son Prince Norodom Ranariddh. But it was forced into a coalition with the Cambodian People's Party of former Khmer Rouge officer Hun Sen.

In September 1993, Sihanouk re-ascended the throne in a traditional Khmer coronation. But the bright promise of the elections soon faded.

Four years after the polls, Hun Sen ended his constant bickering with Ranariddh by overthrowing the prince in a violent coup that shattered the results of the election. International pressure forced Hun Sen to accept Ranariddh's return for a second election in 1998, which was narrowly won by Hun Sen, but ended in more bloodshed as the royalists and other opposition parties forced a constitutional crisis by refusing to join a coalition with the CPP.

Sihanouk stayed on the sidelines for most of the two-year crisis, but as demonstrators clashed in the streets of Phnom Penh, he finally intervened by urging Ranariddh to accept a new coalition with his enemy Hun Sen.

During his last years, Sihanouk's profile and influence receded. While old people in the countryside still held him in reverence, the young generation regarded him as a figure of the past and one partly responsible for Cambodia's tragedy.

Rarely at a loss for words, he became for a time a prolific blogger, posting his musings on current affairs and past controversies. Most of his writing was literally in his own hand — his site featured images of letters, usually in French in a cramped cursive script, along with handwritten marginalia to news clippings that caught his interest.

His production tailed off, however, as he retreated further from the public eye, spending more and more time under doctor's care in Beijing.

The hard-living Sihanouk had suffered ill health since the early 1990s. He endured cancer, a brain lesion and arterial, heart, lung, liver and eye ailments.

Ailing and weary of politics, Sihanouk stepped down from the throne in 2004 in favor of Sihamoni, a well-liked personality but one with little of the experience needed to negotiate Cambodia's political minefields.

Senior officials in Hun Sen's party were said to favor Sihamoni, a one-time ballet dancer and cultural ambassador, rather than a more combative figure to sit atop the influential throne.

In late 2011, on his return from another extended stay in China, Sihanouk dramatically declared that he never intended to leave his homeland again. But true to his mercurial reputation, he flew off to Beijing just a few months later for medical care.

During the same period, some of the defendants at Cambodia's U.N.-assisted genocide trial of former senior Khmer Rouge figures sought to divert blame from themselves by suggesting that Sihanouk, as their collaborator, shared responsibility for their actions, despite his powerlessness as their virtual prisoner.