

My Earlier Initiation to Politics

In general, there was no public lighting in my village. But at night, with some lights coming from the fluorescent lamps in the neighboring houses, the main street looked lit; we could see, from time to time, some bicycle or motorbike riders or walkers passing through. People were enjoying more nocturnal activities than before. From the veranda, almost every time, I could see any unannounced visitor who might be coming. If someone arrived, I would alert my father. Most often after dinner, many of our neighbours came to visit us, spending time chatting with him until they fell exhausted and went back home. They were generally talking about politics, curiously more international than domestic. They analysed the world situation from the Korean War to the Congolese conflict, or from the wars in neighbouring Laos and Vietnam to the nuclear race. They also commented on the roles played by the giants of the world: the USSR, the USA, France, the UK, China, etc. Their comments were mainly based on the news they got from the radio, which broadcast the information three times a day. And the

comments were no different from those of our chief of state, who managed to make his voice heard nearly every day through the national radio, the only channel at the time, when he was visiting his fellow citizens in different parts of his kingdom.

On national politics, my father and his neighbours rarely debated, except to make comments about individual ministers or important people whom they knew personally or whom they had just heard about. But in general, they praised the man who ran the country, Prince Sihanouk, who was regarded as the father of the nation. I learned that kind of world politics by listening to every evening discussion as I served them hot jasmine tea. I also learned, some years later, that my father had been a candidate for the post of deputy in an election organised by the prince's party, "Sangkum Reastr Niyum," or "The Popular Community." But he failed to get elected.

The chief of the district convened a weekly meeting of all the chiefs of communes in his office, called "Sala Srok." We had ten "Khum" or communes. The chief of my father's native commune was his cousin. Every time, after the meeting, the cousin came to visit us

either for lunch or just for an informal chat. He came by bicycle and, years later, by motorbike as his finances permitted. He used to park his bicycle or motorbike under the veranda and then go up the stairs to meet my father in the office. While the cousin was busy chatting upstairs, I was given the immense pleasure of controlling the cousin's belongings. On the back seat of the bicycle or motorbike, I usually found a pile of weekly magazines, especially the one published by the state, entitled "Neak Cheat Niyum" or "The Nationalist," attached with an elastic cord. Since I could read and write, I had always taken one or two copies of "The Nationalist" from the middle of the pile, and the commune chief never noticed. I enjoyed reading a few articles and many pictures that showed the government's activities. I was very interested in the international news, which helped me better understand the subject my father and his neighbours were debating every afternoon. I liked the cartoon portraying the "giants," among whom the most publicized were Eisenhower, Khrushchev, and De Gaulle. The cartoon about Prince Sihanouk and his ministers also drew much of my attention. This was my earlier initiation to politics