

Chapter Three

Cambodia on Fire

(The 1960s and 1970s)

It was in March 1970, when the whole Cambodian nation was preparing to render its last respect to the late supreme patriarch of the Buddhist monks, Samdech Preah Sanghareach Chuon Nath, that the history of Cambodia turned a new page, ending a “golden era” of peace and stability and plunging the country into decades of darkness with endless sufferings, inevitably alternating between destruction and separation, injuries and deaths, genocide and foreign occupation, all in bloodshed and tears. Many Cambodians have learned an adage: “Once a great man dies, the world will be shaken.” This was probably said by our ancestors: each time a king died, infighting broke out over succession to the throne. Cambodian children learned from history textbooks that, for decades, Cambodia rarely had a peaceful transfer of power from one ruler to another. Even though the supreme patriarch was not

a ruler holding real power, his death could be an evil presage for the country.

In fact, the supreme patriarch was the nation's most respected figure, as he was not only the leader of the Buddhist religion but also a great Cambodian scholar who had sacrificed his whole life to protect and promote Khmer arts and literature. He authored the Cambodian dictionary and many other books. He spoke many foreign languages, including French, English, Thai, Lao, Burmese, Vietnamese, and some Chinese dialects. He taught Pali and Sanskrit at universities and gave weekly interviews on the national radio on the Khmer language, its grammar, its writings, and its vocabulary, which was a very popular program that drew in a large audience. I was one of the regular listeners, a loyal fan of the program.

The patriarch had many students who became ministers or VIPs. According to the protocol determined by the royal palace, his rank rose to the same level as the reigning king and queen, to whom we must speak in royal language. Somehow, the Khmer language is rich; for example, we have more than ten words for

the verb "to eat." Special vocabulary is used depending on people's social categories. In September 1969, the patriarch had died at the age of 83. Because of his rank, protocol required the ceremony to take place at least six months later, probably in March 1970, so as many people as possible, even from remote areas, could pay their respects to the great man. From the day he died until the final cremation day, religious ceremonies had been organised every day, day and night, as delegations were coming from everywhere across the country. The patriarch's body was put inside a golden urn. It was displayed for the public at his official residence, Unnalom Pagoda. To honour the late great Buddhist monk, police and military men, and members of the youth, Yuvann, all in uniform, were dispatched to the residence.

The 18th of March 1970 Event

For many months, my other duties were to be posted as a guard at the main entrance of the patriarch's residence. Every day, once I arrived at the pagoda, I remained immobile, standing in that place from 3 p.m. until 9 p.m. At the time, I was still working for the state-run brewery, SKD. I was among low-ranking officials who were ordered to fulfil the duties of honouring the late King-monk, his official title in our language. I did not know precisely when the cremation ceremony would take place. I only imagined that the ceremony would be grandiose, commensurate with the respect and love the people had for him. But the whole nation was awaiting the arrival of the Chief of State, Prince Sihanouk, who had left the country in January for France for a medical check-up. He had changed his schedule several times. Now, by word of mouth, he might be arriving within days, in mid-March.

During his absence, the country's political situation deteriorated steadily and critically. For weeks and months, the

local media, usually loyal to the Chief of State, had revealed many scandalous stories about his entourage's corruption, and armed incidents had occurred frequently at the border between the Royal Khmer Armed Forces and the Vietcong. In the streets, people talked openly about the Viet Cong's sanctuaries inside Cambodia. Rumours were circulating that some high-ranking officials had lent support to the Vietcong and had closely collaborated with them, providing them with ammunition and food supplies.

On March 8, people demonstrated in a village named Chantrea in Svay Rieng Province, at the border with South Vietnam, denouncing the Vietcong occupation of Cambodian territory. On March 11, in Phnom Penh, student demonstrations turned into violent riots against the North Vietnamese embassy and the office of the Viet Cong representative, which was the embassy of the "Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam." Thousands of people sacked the two communist Vietnamese embassies. But for the Cambodians in the streets or the ordinary peasants, no one could imagine or think that those

incidents would be the starting point of an event that would lead to the coup against the venerated Chief of State.

On March 16, another student demonstration took place, during which demonstrators violently beat one man because he had hurled insults at the person of the prince, the “beloved Father of the Nation.” The man was severely injured. The crowd alleged he was launching sabotage and treason activities against the royalist regime. Generally, people saw the March 16 demonstration as likely supportive of “the prince” rather than a precursor to his upcoming fall. Many believed it was a political orchestration to support the Chief of State's diplomatic activities, including his astute deal with the communist bloc. Rumours were spreading across the country that even the anti-Vietnamese demonstrations had gotten the prince's approval. At the time, unlike school and university students, I did not participate in any of them, as employees or civil servants were not all mobilised. Finally, what was bound to happen was happening. It was a grave but bewildering period of our long tragedy.

The afternoon of March 18, 1970, was a tragic moment in our history. That afternoon, under the heat of the sun, I was walking up the dusty road from my house to “The Kapok Tree Market” bus station to take the three-wheeled vehicle, a Lambretta, to Unnalom Pagoda as usual. As I neared the bridge before reaching the station, I heard, through the transistors in the shops and houses along the road, amid the noisy sounds of car horns and engines, the last part of the national anthem. Eager to learn more about it, I stopped walking, stepped next to a small shop nearby, and lent my ears to the radio broadcast, thinking to hear an important message from the Queen Mother¹, as normally only after an important message, a speech, or an allocution by the Queen would the national radio air the national anthem. Looking inside the shop, I noticed people were talking seriously in small groups. I waited for a while; immediately after the national anthem, the radio program aired only military-march music. Suddenly, the military music was interrupted, and the radio aired the official

¹ Queen Mother Preah Kosoomak Neary Roath was the mother of Prince Sihanouk

announcement again. This time, it was the voice of Cheng Heng, the President of the National Assembly, acting as interim head of state. As Acting Chief of State, he had the right to end his speech with the airing of the national anthem. Cheng Heng was reading a short statement saying, in brief, “The National Assembly and the Council of the Kingdom, meeting in a congress, have decided to remove their confidence from Prince Norodom Sihanouk in his function as Chief of State from March 18, 1970, at 13h00.”²

On the spot, I was shocked and decided to rush back home, abandoning my initial plan to fulfil my duty to honour the late scholar. At home, my two brothers were busy listening carefully to the radio. They agreed that I should stay home and that we should be prepared for the worst. We stopped all activities except listening to the radio. In my mind, I tried to gauge the full extent of the situation. Unfamiliar with political uncertainty, I imagined the possible beginning of the “Third World War.” In contrast, Sinoeun,

² Ministère de l’information, Documents, Cabinets Ministériels Khmers, du 18 Mars 1948 au 18 Mars 1970, Message à la Nation de Son Excellence Cheng Heng, Président de l’Assemblée Nationale, Exerçant les Pouvoirs de Chef de l’Etat, Phnom Penh, 1970, p. 170.

like many university students, seemed optimistic and approved of the coup. He did not hide his satisfaction at seeing the end of the royalist regime. He believed the event would be a milestone for a true democracy in Cambodia.

The radio kept alternating between military-march music, the acting Chief of State's announcement, and the government's communiqué. Since its formation, the government had been called "the Government of Salvage." In fact, Prince Sihanouk appointed the government, with then-General Lon Nol as Prime Minister, at the end of January 1968, after the resignation of the previous one, calling it the "Last Chance Government." Under his reign, either as King or Chief of State, a royal government lasted approximately six months. At the time, Prince Sihanouk appointed and dismissed his government at will.

From time to time, we also heard announcements from Prime Minister General Lon Nol, the strongman, informing the public that he had removed the police commissioner of the capital, one of Prince Sihanouk's close aides. The strongman also appealed to the Cambodian people to unite behind his government to avoid

bloodshed. We had spent hours and hours listening to the radio, which finally aired the entire debates of the National Assembly until late in the night.

Lawmakers raised constitutional issues rather than the military coup. Most speakers were known for their loyalty to the prince. All speakers, including In Tam, the acting President of the National Assembly, had turned against him. They attacked the Chief of State violently. During the debate, lawmakers charged the prince with five chief accusations: treason, constant violation of the constitution, squandering state property and public money, corruption, and the annihilation of national prestige and dignity. As little people, we did not understand “politics” very well. We were just surprised by the accusations. But the way lawmakers presented the case, debating articles of the constitution on how the Chief of State was chosen and appointed, made us believe it was unlikely to be a military coup. According to those lawmakers, it was just a constitutional issue for which the parliament had full powers to act.

They Said Acting in Accordance with the Constitution

In fact, the Kingdom's first constitution was promulgated in May 1947, when Prince Sihanouk was still a young king. In 1941, the French protectorate had chosen him to succeed to the throne when his grandfather, King Sisowath Monivong, died. At 18, he became King of Cambodia. In 1955, King Sihanouk abdicated the throne in favour of his father, King Suramarit, to play a more active role in Cambodian politics. This was a special case, as the throne was generally transferred from father to son. Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy with the king as the head of state. Since he abdicated the throne, the former king has, on several occasions, held the position of President of the Council of Ministers, which is equivalent to Prime Minister. But in the pre-1970 period, the President of the Council of Ministers was sometimes aided by a Prime Minister who acted effectively on his behalf. Son Sann is one example. Son Sann was appointed Prime Minister in 1968, while Prince Sihanouk, Chief of State, held the position of President of the Council of Ministers.

When his father, King Suramarit, died in 1960, Prince Sihanouk moved to amend the constitution by creating a position of Chief of State. He then occupied this position by giving Queen Kossamak, his mother, a symbolic role as the Guardian of the Monarchy, as the constitution prohibited women from reigning. According to the constitution, the chief of state was nominated by the Sangkum Rreastr Niyum, "The Popular Community or the People's Socialist Community," the prince's rallying movement, and appointed by a joint vote of the National Assembly and the Council of the Kingdom in a special session called "congress." (Prince Sihanouk never referred, in the past, to the Sangkum Reastr Niyum as a political party. He preferred to call it "the Rallying Movement for National Unity"). On March 18, the parliament pretended to do the same for his dismissal: the same way in, the same way out, except that the party or the rallying movement did not meet to dismiss him and choose a candidate to replace him. The Rallying Movement for National Unity did not recommend to the Congress that Prince Sihanouk be dismissed and that a replacement be nominated.

The first night of that historic day was quiet and peaceful, but we were so scared that we did not sleep well. The next day I went to work as usual. In the streets, I saw incessant movements of military vehicles. Some heavily armed military officers were escorting VIPs of the Sihanouk regime in military Jeeps to unknown locations. I was told that those VIPs would be detained. I also saw many tanks or armoured vehicles in front of the public and government buildings. Traffic seemed smoother and more orderly than before. For at least one month, law and order had been well maintained and respected.

Lon Nol Government Was to Chase Away Communist Vietnamese

Nevertheless, the new regime had based its legitimacy on the anti-Vietnamese sentiments of a large portion of the Cambodian people. Cambodians looked at the Vietnamese as their hereditary enemy. Cambodia had lost an important part of her territory to the

Vietnamese in the past centuries. The Vietnamese occupation of any new Cambodian territory would inflame a very high Cambodian patriotism and exacerbate nationalism. Most Cambodians were fundamentally nationalist and patriotic. In those days, we were genuinely incapable of thinking about a civil war or Cambodian killing fellow Cambodian. But Cambodians were ready to sacrifice their lives for their motherland in the event of foreign aggression. We were ready to fight foreign invaders. Still, we are in the present time.

Lon Nol government launched a violent campaign against the communist Vietnamese, the Vietcong, and the North Vietnamese. They justified the coup as an indispensable operation to stop the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodian territory. In fact, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese governments did enjoy strong support from the Vietnamese community in Cambodia, in addition to a special friendship with Sihanouk's regime. Lon Nol then carried on dismantling all Vietnamese networks throughout the country. The process began with the arrest of suspected enemies and gradually it led to the systematic expulsion of Vietnamese

nationals from Cambodia. Every day, I saw the police searching for Vietnamese immigrants from house to house. Those Vietnamese would be sent to transit camps, which were set up in the main cities before they were definitively repatriated to South Vietnam or maybe sent to a third country. Many Vietnamese were selling out their belongings in a hurry and volunteering to enter the camps rather than to get caught by the Cambodian police. Taking advantage of the situation, I bought a cheap world-band receiver radio from a Vietnamese family that later allowed me to access world news in response to the events of March 18. The Lon Nol anti-Vietnamese policy received strong support from students, intellectuals, and city dwellers. Many young Cambodians volunteered to join Lon Nol's army. Without proper preparation and training, they were sent to fight the Vietcong, who, by contrast, were among the most experienced combatants in the world. Many perished in the first fight. Thousands of young Cambodians would die in the first months of the war, believing they were dying for a good cause.

Unlike my second brother, Sinoeun, who strongly supported the new regime, I was more conservative and worried about our fate. We often clashed in words and arguments, but my elder brother, Chhoeun, always supported me. So, we were two against one. With the world-band receiver, I had easy access to Radio Beijing, a popular radio station at the time. Its programs in Khmer and its political editorials echoed the general sentiment of many people who still loved the former King.

Reaction of Prince Sihanouk

Prince Sihanouk left Paris for Moscow on March 13, a superstitious day for some in his entourage, who had jokingly advised him not to make the trip. The prince was on a five-day visit to the USSR. The day he was deposed, he was about to leave Moscow for China. His entourage learned the bad news on the radio but did not decide to inform the prince, the chief of state. Soviet Premier Kosygin brought him the news in a car en route to

the airport. According to his book entitled "My War with the CIA," he answered Kosygin's question about what he intended to do in response to the coup. Prince Sihanouk wrote, "I am going to fight, of course."³ His reaction was immediate. It was to resist, fight back, and to take revenge. When he arrived in Beijing, Premier Chou En Lai of China greeted him, having invited the diplomatic corps to welcome the prince at the airport and assuring him that he was still recognised as the legitimate head of state of Cambodia. According to the same book, Chou En Lai asked the same question of the prince, who replied, "I will fight until the end," but the Chinese Premier asked him again to think it over within 24 hours to ensure the prince's decision was definitive. The next day, Prince Sihanouk met with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam, who made a special trip from Hanoi to Beijing to discuss the Cambodian situation. The Vietnamese premier pledged his full support to the prince in case he chose to fight back. He promised

³ Norodom Sihanouk, *La CIA Contre le Cambodge*, Francois Maspero, Paris, 1973, pp 13-21

to help the Cambodian leader retake his power within a short period of time.

On March 20 and 21, Prince Sihanouk publicly announced his decision to resist. On March 23, he appealed to the Cambodian people to join him in a “maquis,” in a united front, and to support a united royal government dominated by the Khmer Rouge that he would set up on May 5, 1970. Since his arrival on Chinese soil, Beijing had become his rear base, and Radio Beijing his important campaign tool to reconquer power. Every night, at a regular hour, I spent a significant amount of time listening to the radio, hearing, in hiding, his appeal for rebellion and revolution, in his regular speeches or messages to the nation.

Who is Lon Nol ?

Before March 18, 1970, ordinary Cambodians knew Lon Nol as one of the prince's trusted military men. We called him the “General” because he was the only active military commander

wearing “stars” known to the public. We learned that he began his career not as a soldier but as a magistrate, later as an assistant chief of district, or “Balat Srok,” from which he rose to governor of a province. In the 1950s, by the time King Sihanouk began his campaign for national independence against the French protectorate, Lon Nol held the position of governor of Battambang, a rich western province of Cambodia. The king had appointed him as a “Colonel” to take care of the military component of his royal crusade. So, he started his military career from the rank of colonel in a campaign against the French and the Vietminh (a Vietnamese communist group that occupied part of the Cambodian territory during the First Indochina War)

According to official records, our general had not been trained in a military academy.⁴ But despite his civilian background, Lon Nol was respected by most soldiers. Because of his dark skin, they called him “Black Papa.” Lon Nol looked like a pure Khmer or Khmer Angkor, although he was taller than most Cambodians. He

⁴ Later on, Lon Nol may have received military training, but I am unable to obtain verified information.

also originated from my native province, Prey Veng. He was very superstitious and would not take any risk without first consulting an astrologer, receiving a Buddhist monk's benediction, or wearing amulets with supernatural powers. For many years before the coup, he had been very active in helping Buddhist monks and building pagodas across the country. In January 1970, he had just donated a power generator to light a pagoda in my native district. So far, I did not know the exact level of his knowledge or the depth of his understanding of Buddhism, but for sure, Lon Nol was well known to the public for his strong belief in the magic powers of the abstract world, gods, and spirits. He organised many religious ceremonies, visited many holy places, and invited well-known masters of those powers to visit him many times a year.

Lon Nol had a very good and well-respected wife named Chumteav Kheng, or Lady Kheng, who died in 1969. He also had a younger brother named Lon Non, who would become his right-hand man and, later, his political burden. I heard that, in March 1970, Lon Nol was reluctant to stage the coup. According to rumours, he acted only under pressure from one of his closest

associates, Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, cousin of Prince Sihanouk and, at the time, a Deputy Prime Minister. People in the streets, including myself, learned by word of mouth that Lon Nol was not willing at first to depose the prince and that Prince Sirik Matak was the man behind the coup. However, we did not know the exact details of the coup operations. It was just rumours. I did not know how close Prince Sirik Matak was to Prince Sihanouk, or what kind of associate he was to Lon Nol. Many history books described Sirik Matak as a co-founder, along with Lon Nol, in the late 1940s, of a political party named “Khmer Renovation Party” or “Khemarak Ponnakar” in Khmer.

Prince Sirik Matak and Disputes in the Royal Family

Prince Sirik Matak was a member of the royal family who had held many ministerial positions. Official records show that he was appointed, for the first time, Secretary of State for National Defence in 1952, when King Sihanouk was leading his royal government and beginning his crusade to gain national independence from the

French. Prince Sirik Matak had served as minister many times in different governments, overseeing defence, education, tourism, and information. At the time, in Cambodia, there was a general understanding that members of the royal family had, for many years, been in conflict over the succession to the throne. In fact, there were two lines of the royal family: Norodom and Sisowath. Both were descendants of King Ang Duong. Prince Sihanouk originated from both lines: Norodom through his father, Norodom Suramarit, and Sisowath through his mother, Sisowath Kossamak, while Prince Sirik Matak is only from the Sisowath line.

King Ang Duong was recognised as the ruler of Cambodia in 1845. He was officially crowned King in 1848 amid Thailand and Vietnam's rivalry over domination and interference in Cambodian politics, which had intensified since the 18th century. He was the first King of Cambodia to propose French protection to help Cambodia escape the dilemma of either Thai or Vietnamese rule. A protectorate treaty was concluded, and it was effectively established after he died. King Ang Duong had three children from different wives: King Norodom, King Sisowath, and Prince Sivutha.

Only the two lines of King Ang Duong's descendants, Norodom and Sisowath, were entitled to accede to the Cambodian throne, as Prince Sivutha, the third, rebelled against his elder brother, King Norodom. Members of the two lines of the royal family remain eligible for the kingship according to today's constitution, which was adopted by the constituent assembly in September 1993. The people of Cambodia elected the assembly in a general election organised by the United Nations in May 1993.

The Cambodian monarchic system has no designated crown prince. In the past, when the reigning King died, a council would select a new king among many prince candidates from the two lines. Female descendants are not allowed to claim the throne. Our princes were equal competitors. They were not prepared to accept easily any predominance of their princely adversaries. However, the reigning king, before his death, might wish to designate his son, his brother, or his nephew to succeed him. In general, the designated heir in such circumstances was the reigning king's son. Traditionally, the elder one was chosen if the king had many children. And our King, having many wives, had

many children. Our princes often had many half-brothers or half-sisters.

At the time, King Norodom, the elder son of King Ang Duong, made an exception. When he was still alive, he had appointed his brother, Sisowath, as the vice-king or second king. In Khmer, we called him "Preah Obaraj." Before he died, King Norodom officially designated Preah Obaraj Sisowath, his half-brother, as the heir to the throne, provided that, in turn, after his reign, King Sisowath would restore the throne to King Norodom's son. King Sisowath did not honour the promise. Instead of returning the throne to the Norodom line, he designated his own son, Monivong, as the next King of Cambodia, which caused a succession conflict between the two lines.

Prince Sihanouk acknowledged this royal dispute. But in the same book he wrote in 1972, the prince blamed the French protectorate for the royal family's division. The issue worsened when King Sisowath Monivong made his last will, leaving the throne to his son, Prince Sisowath Monireth. If nothing had changed, the Sisowath line would have assured its continuity. But

this time, the French protectorate believed the throne should go to the Norodom line. So, they tried to find a balanced solution acceptable to both lines, Norodom and Sisowath. In 1941, when King Sisowath Monivong died, the French officials chose a young prince named Sihanouk. The French thought the young prince would be easily manipulated, and the choice would be an ideal balance, as his father, Prince Suramarit, was a grandson of King Norodom, and his mother, Princess Kossamak, was a granddaughter of King Sisowath and a daughter of the late King Sisowath Monivong. The choice of young Prince Norodom Sihanouk instead of Prince Sisowath Monireth made the Sisowath line unhappy. Many ordinary people of my father's generation knew those stories and told them to their offspring. But the history textbooks on Cambodia may give a more accurate account of the throne conflicts. So, the Cambodian public, in general, understood the March 18, 1970 coup as revenge by Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak against the ex-King Norodom Sihanouk, the Chief of State.

In the same book, Prince Sihanouk's first reaction to the coup was as follows: "It was no surprise to me that Sirik Matak

made the coup. He had hated me since my childhood because he believed that Prince Sisowath Monireth, his uncle, should be chosen to succeed to the throne, instead of me. He might believe that one should choose him to be king too⁵. Curiously, many years later, in the 1980s, in our common exile, I got to know a Cambodian couple whose husband was a son of Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak and whose wife was a daughter of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The two lines of the royal family were finally reconciled.

Prince Sihanouk Did Not Trust the US

Behind the coup was a group of politicians unhappy with Prince Sihanouk's past policies. In 1955, when he founded his political movement, the "Sangkum Reastr Niyum, or the Sangkum, the "Popular Community" or the People's Socialist Community, after eliminating other political parties through elections,

⁵ Norodom Sihanouk, *le CIA contre le Cambodge*, *ibid*, p. 19.

referendums, mass demonstrations, and other political manoeuvring, Prince Sihanouk led the country in his personal style. By 1963, the prince nationalised all private banks, insurance, the import and export trade, and distilleries. He restricted the importation of luxurious goods. He created many state-run enterprises, including SKD and the glassware factory, where I got my first jobs in late 1968. He cut off diplomatic relations with the USA, depriving Cambodia of US military and economic assistance, and he made friends with communist powers such as China, the USSR, Eastern Europe, Cuba, North Korea, North Vietnam, and Vietcong. In the Western world, he chose France as the alternative to the USA. He admired General de Gaulle.

Prince Sihanouk had his reasons to take an anti-US stand, as the US and its allies, especially South Vietnam and Thailand, had supported a group of rebels called Khmer Serei, or Free Khmer, who were operating in the border area. The Khmer Serei was led by Son Ngoc Thanh, a fierce opponent who was installed as Prime Minister in August 1945 by the Japanese when they briefly took power from the French in a coup de force in Cambodia

in 1945. Later, Son Ngoc Thanh was imprisoned by the French and the Allied forces and fled to South Vietnam and Thailand. He was followed in his rebellion against Prince Sihanouk in the late 1950s by Sam Sary, one of Prince Sihanouk's aides who had helped him form his political movement, the Sangkum. At the same time, a plot by another pro-US military man named Dap Chhuon, a powerful governor of Siem Reap Province, in a coup attempt, was uncovered, giving clear evidence of US, South Vietnamese, and Thai connections and backing. Dap Chhuon, the author of the plot, was shot dead in a military operation led by Lon Nol, who, at the time, was gaining enhanced appreciation and trust from Prince Sihanouk.

Another plot to kill the prince and his parents, by US allies, occurred on August 31, 1959. A pair of suitcases, supposedly containing gifts for his parents, King Suramarit and Queen Kossamak, was delivered to the royal palace. One of the two suitcases exploded when Prince Vakrivan, the chief of protocol, opened it, killing him and another palace official on the spot, while the two monarchs were meeting, in an adjoining room, with Son

Sann, the governor of the national bank and Vice- President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Son Sann, who became my boss in the national resistance against the Vietnamese occupation in the 1980s, told me this story too, 20 years later.

The repetition of plots against him, with often strong evidence of US and its allies' involvement, in addition to many examples of coups and political assassinations orchestrated by the CIA in their search for surer anti-communist allies in the region, made the prince fearful of any relationship with the US and the West, except for France. Prince Sihanouk labelled Cambodian politicians who were pro-Western or sympathised with the Khmer Serei as Blue Khmer or Khmer Khieu. As anti-Sihanoukists, many Khmer Khieu were also labelled as republican. Any Khmer Khieu, Blue Khmer, or republican found in obvious contact with the Khmer Serei of Son Ngoc Thanh would be accused of treason. He would be arrested, imprisoned, or executed. Prince Sihanouk would also encourage people to use airtime on the national radio to hurl insulting messages at the Khmer Serei or the Free Khmer, voicing support

for the prince's political actions against their propaganda. The Khmer Serei's combatants were operating an anti-Sihanouk radio station from the Khmer-Thai border area. After the coup of March 1970, Son Ngoc Thanh returned to Cambodia and became Lon Nol's Prime Minister in 1972.

The Khmer Rouge and Khmer Intellectuals

In contrast, the prince labelled another group of politicians whose ideology was to support communism or socialism as "Red Khmer" or "Khmer Kraham" or, in French, "Khmer Rouge." Khmer Rouge became well known to the Western world because the prince always referred to them by their French appellation. In those years of the 1960s, a man, one of the fellow natives of Prey Veng province, much older than me asked me, "Do the Khmer Rouge (Red Khmer) have a red face or red skin?" I was so surprised by the stupid question, because the guy was not completely illiterate. While the Prince distanced himself from the US and their allies, and while he moved closer to the communist

bloc, he had also imprisoned the Khmer Rouge. Many people, including teachers and intellectuals, were arrested and jailed. It was the case of my uncle, who was imprisoned only because of his training in China. Others would escape from prison and join the Khmer Rouge secret bases in remote areas. This was the case of Khmer Rouge leading figures such as Pol Pot (or Saloth Sar), Khieu Samphan, Son Sen, Ieng Sary, Hou Youn, and Hu Nim. Khieu Samphan, his two associates, Hou Youn and Hu Nim, disappeared in 1967 when, in Phnom Penh, many people assumed that Prince Sihanouk's police might have killed them. Some socialist-inclined intellectuals who had been trained in France were known to the young students or workers like me for their integrity and their nationalistic, revolutionary, and anti-Western ideology. Many of them educated us to reject Western civilisation, especially the US, which they called neo-colonialist and imperialist. They highlighted their beliefs to the point where some "red" teachers would suggest that our "Pek Kuok" or "yam bean" tastes were far better than apples; as in Cambodia, apples were one of the symbols of luxury products we imported from the Western world."

In Cambodia, the circle of intellectuals was small, but alongside other high-class people, they were active in politics. Ordinary Cambodians were ready to respect the authority of any leader, so far as its legitimacy could be proved, because legitimate leaders were accepted as “merit-makers,” following the traditional norms of Buddhism. At the time, I saw two categories of intellectuals: the Buddhist-educated and the Western-educated.

The first category of intellectuals belonged to the new generation of Buddhist monks, which was also called the “new church” or, in Khmer, “Thor Thmei,” which, in principle, they had a good knowledge of Buddhism, especially its triple canons or “Tripataka” (the Buddhist holy scripture), and they held that politics were not forbidden to Buddhist monks, so long as political activity was meant to promote peace and the happiness of the people. New church monks translated the Buddhist teachings into Khmer, while the old church “Thor Chas” repeated the teachings in Pali, an old language practised by the Buddha in his ancient time. But this openness of mind sometimes led them into struggles for more rights and freedom. That is why we found them in the

street, in mass demonstrations since the 1930s, either to protest against the French protectorate or to support any movement for more civil liberties. As non-conservative, their activities might also hurt the monarchy, which was part of the Cambodian Buddhist tradition. Many of these intellectuals remained attached to the nationalist camp; very few followed the communist path.

The second category included former students who had studied either in the capital, Phnom Penh, or abroad, particularly in France. Many were members of the royal family or families of high-ranking officials, and very few belonged to the middle and working classes. The latter could not pursue their studies without enormous financial support from their parents or scholarships from the Cambodian or host-country governments. In this category, there were a group of the “big and rich” and a group of the “poor.”

Those who chose to engage in politics did so because politics led them directly into the upper class or kept them at the same level of social status, or because of political belief. Most of the “big and rich” remained conservative, while most of the “poor” had a tendency toward socialism, certainly because of a complex of

materialistic inferiority. Faced with capitalist ways of life, spoiled by wealth, the power of money, and the honours the first group received due to their status, left-leaning intellectuals inclined to the left suffered from complexes, felt offended, and dreamed of liberating themselves from their state of inferiority. They wished to re-establish justice for all and took Marxist approaches to combat social injustice. Prince Sihanouk used to say in his public speeches in the 1960s that “our students, who were sent to France, came back as communists, while those sent to Moscow came back as capitalists.”

It is true that when one entered a developed country like France, where all luxurious things and comforts existed that one could not afford due to a lack of means, one would feel a victim of social injustice and would be receptive to the communist doctrine. Many Khmer Rouge leaders were in this category. In contrast, those sent to Moscow were able to see and to live with communism. They realised that with communism, they would never have freedom and individual rights.

Among the “leftist intellectuals,” the majority were teachers, who had a considerable influence over the youth. They knew how to attract young Cambodians and spread the ideal of several honest and honourable intellectuals who were also competent and industrious. Those intellectuals provided valuable support to the Khmer Rouge at a later stage in their fight to gain control over Cambodia.

I Became a Member of a Commando

During the war, after the coup, the Lon Nol government ordered all civil servants to form several groups of “commandos.” Military officers were dispatched to different ministries, departments, or public establishments to train civilians in combat skills and the use of weaponry. The “commandos” “main duties were to guard public buildings, especially their workplace, day and night, and to provide logistical support to the military when needed. As an employee of a state-owned company, I could not escape those duties. Like my colleagues, I received military

training such as self-defence, military discipline, and some gun-firing techniques. But I was not an assiduous trainee. I missed many training sessions to the point where the top management of the company decided to warn me that my behaviour was not appropriate, taking into account the grave circumstances of the country. The warning made me feel like I was not a real patriot.

As a member of the “commandos,” my duties were to guard the main entrance of the SKD building, in rotation with other colleagues, for a few hours a day. At night, we would be sent to guard the residence of the big boss, the company’s CEO. On duty, we were armed with a rifle, a French A1 carbine. Later on, with US military assistance, some commandos would be equipped with M16 rifles. The boss was a generous man. Every night, he provided us with a proper dinner and iced tea. We never saw him or any member of his family at home, as we were posted on the rooftop of his villas. My CEO was an inspector of the customs department, a lucrative job in the Cambodian civil service. Mrs Chine Renne, his wife, was well known because she had served as the Secretary of State for Information under Prince Sihanouk

from 1967 to 1969. She was a rare woman to hold a ministerial position. My boss had been appointed a few months earlier, after the dismissal of one of Prince Sihanouk's aides, who was accused of embezzlement and sentenced to many years in prison. While I was fulfilling my duties on the rooftop of the villa, my thoughts went elsewhere: my future, which looked more and more uncertain with the military coup.

Many residents of Phnom Penh seemed to accommodate their daily lives with the new political reality in the most natural way. Military uniforms became the all-time fashion. Commando members wore uniforms but no military ranks. A commando officer would carry a pistol at his waist to differentiate himself from the ranks and file. At that time, carrying a pistol was a sign of commanding status, thus stylish and attractive.

In Lon Nol's Army, Any Rank Can Be Bought

Many civil servants rushed to buy pistols. Others simply changed their jobs to become army officers. But the army became so corrupt that military ranks could be bought. Little by little, month after month, in addition to its regular personnel, Lon Nol's army was inflating, populated with all sorts of people: civil servants, schoolteachers, businessmen, carpenters, butchers, barbers, artists, and other job seekers who considered the army as the best place to earn their living and get rich in wartime. One of my friends, Muntha, joined the army as a second lieutenant in the first year of the war. He has disappeared since then.

A year later, after I had left SKD, I realised that the burden of the war had not been shared with all citizens, as in the private sector. Especially in my new companies, Sokilait and Comin Khmer, workers were not mobilised to serve in any commando unit. In those companies, I was released from the duties of guarding the office building and residence. I dedicated my energy

fully to my professional activities, as my company had paid compensation to the army to free the staff from all obligations.

Lon Nol's Alliance Fell Apart

After one year of existence, Lon Nol's regime lost more and more support from the people, and its territory shrank. In March 1971, the Khmer Rouge-dominated front led by Prince Sihanouk claimed that four-fifths of Cambodia fell under their control. Conflicts between the partners within the coalition against Prince Sihanouk broke out openly. By October 1970, Lon Nol proclaimed the Khmer Republic in Phnom Penh. Prince Sirik Matak renounced his title and privileges as a prince to become a normal citizen. Later, he founded the Republican Party. In Tam, the acting President of the National Assembly, reunited the democrats and reactivated the Democrat Party, created in the 1940s by veteran politicians who produced Cambodia's first constitution in 1947.

In Tam was the governor of the southern province of Takeo, whom Prince Sihanouk promoted to Minister of the Interior in December 1964 after he arrested two Khmer Serei officials, agents of Son Ngoc Thanh. One of the two, named Preap In, was his relative. Preap In was brought to a special congress in Phnom Penh and sentenced to death by a military court. He was executed by firing squad in a place along Road 4, called "Trapeang Kraloeng," in Kampong Speu province. The Ministry of Information filmed the execution and showed it to the public. In Tam was a beautiful talker with his populist style. Each time he spoke in public, he always referred to the good Cambodian way of life, his love for Khmer culture and civilisation, especially Khmer traditional music. Until the day Prince Sihanouk was deposed, he had always pledged his loyalty to the prince. At the time of the coup, In Tam was the Acting President of the National Assembly; as the holder of the position, Cheng Heng became Acting Chief of State in Prince Sihanouk's absence. Since the coup, In Tam had become one of the prince's uncompromising foes. He now made public statements that "for many years, he has admired, in secret, the "great leadership" of Lon Nol. But now, one year after the coup,

Tam prepared to challenge this so-called “great leadership” as he became the leader of the rejuvenated Democrat Party, the legal opposition party.

Constitution of 1947 and the Democratic Party

The Democratic Party was created in 1946 by some eminent intellectuals whose main ideas were to bring democracy to Cambodia and to gain its independence from France. Many had studied in France. The leading figures among its founders were Prince Sisowath Youtevong, Ieu Koeus, Sim Var, Chhean Vam, and Thonn Ouk. Except for Prince Youtevong and Ieu Koeus, I had the chance to work with the other three veterans, namely Chhean Vam, Sim Var, and Thonn Ouk, when we were united in an anti-Vietnamese front in the late 1970s, under another veteran politician, Son Sann. Prince Youtevong was a rare Cambodian who held a PhD in mathematics. He was a prince of great culture. According to history books, still young, at the age of 34, he died in

1947 from complications arising from work overload, tuberculosis, and a malaria attack. Ieu Koeus was assassinated in January 1950. Prince Youtevong and Ieu Koeus were the main contributors to adopting the first Cambodian constitution, which recognised essential citizens' rights and laid the foundation for a parliamentary monarchy. The National Assembly adopted the constitution, elected for the first time by universal male suffrage. At the time, women had no right to vote. The election was made possible under the French protectorate, as, according to the *modus vivendi* signed in January 1946, upon their return to Cambodia immediately after World War II, French authorities had acknowledged the King's autonomy in internal administration, allowing the creation of political parties, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and other civil liberties.

The election took place in September 1946. The Democrat Party won the majority, gaining 50 of 69 seats. As a result, the Democrats formed a government led by Prince Youtevong. Their mandate also included drafting and adopting the new constitution, which was finally promulgated on May 16, 1947. However, this

constitution contained some provisions that allowed the King to interfere in government business, as it stipulated that all executive, legislative, and judicial powers emanated from the King, who had the right to appoint and dismiss the government, as well as to dissolve the National Assembly that was elected by the people.

Since 1946, the Democrat Party had won every election, but the Democrat legislature never completed its term, as King Sihanouk dissolved it when he needed to keep the political situation under his control. The Democrats had won all general elections until the King abdicated the throne in favour of his father and resolutely entered politics. He created his own political movement, the Sangkum, in 1955. From that date, Cambodia was placed under a one-party system, and the Democrat Party remained in limbo until 1971.

In addition to the military front, Lon Nol conducted the war on other fronts as well: the purification of the Khmer race called “Khmer-Mon,” using Buddhism against communism, and the modern republican revolution against the archaic monarchy, hoping to create and maintain the momentum for the people’s

support of his regime. Political parties were allowed to form. His younger brother, Lon Nol, created and led a party named the "Socio-Republican Party," regrouping Lon Nol supporters and opponents of ex-Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak's Republican Party. The Democrat Party reappeared in the new political arena with the same logo: an elephant head holding three lotus flowers. The party first attracted support from the youth and intellectuals. Among its leaders, in addition to In Tam, who still enjoyed some popularity, I found two other leaders, Douc Rasy and Chau Sau.

Douc Rasy was known as a "rightist" politician, or one of the "Blue Khmer," who had served as Under-Secretary of State for Justice in July 1958 for six months and as Secretary of State for Planning in October 1966 for another six months. He was also known as a longtime Member of the National Assembly. He had run a French edition of a newspaper called "Phnom Penh Press" in the 1950s and 1960s. By the time the Democrat Party was reactivated, he was teaching at the Phnom Penh Law School (Faculty of Law). Chau Sau, another lecturer at the same Law School, was the opposite of Douc Rasy.

Chau Sau was politically inclined toward socialism; that is why Prince Sihanouk painted his group “Pink,” or “See Chumpoo” in Khmer. He was highly respected for his integrity. He also served as Under-Secretary of State, Secretary of State for Finance, and Secretary of State for Planning from October 1962 to October 1966 in the most stable government of the time under Prime Minister Prince Norodom Kantol. Chau Sau was a rare Cambodian politician who, in private, wore simple sandals, drove his car himself, especially his Citroën 2CV, and sat down with street people, eating Chinese noodles on the sidewalk. When asked why, he replied, “This is the best way to know the real living conditions of the ordinary people.” Many Cambodians criticised our political leaders for not knowing the reality of ordinary people’s world, the daily price of rice, and especially that of Chinese noodles, for example. Chau Sau wanted to make a difference. He was born in Kampuchea Krom, a southern part of the Cambodian territory annexed by Vietnam. We recognised our compatriots born in that part as Kampuchea Krom or Khmer Krom by their name and their accent. In Kampuchea Krom, the same family name was given to all residents of the same village, even though they originated from

different families. By their name, we recognised not their individual family but their village. The most used family names are: Chau, Son, Truong, Thach, Danh, and Kim. The Khmer Krom formed a strong community in Cambodia. Known as victims of Vietnamese persecution, especially in South Vietnam, in the recent past, many Khmer Krom in Cambodia have dearly upheld patriotic values and engaged easily in politics.

Soon after, my brother, Sinoeun, joined the Democratic Party, as did many of his fellow law students. And quickly, he rose through the hierarchy of the party. He had a very good relationship with its leadership. Sinoeun finally lured me into the party as well. At the time, I did not know much about the party's history or its political essence. Sinoeun handed me a copy of the party's manifesto, which was written in French by Chau Sau. The manifesto analysed the country's socio-economic and political situation and recalled the party's success stories in the 1940s and 1950s. I was very much impressed by the analysis, as it went into detail. I noted with particular interest the tone the party had set to fight, for example, against dictatorship, corruption, and, in

particular, the Lon Nol regime. I was also excited to see in person In Tam, Douc Rasy, Chau Sau, and other party leaders whom I had known only by name through the media. From then on, I could participate in meetings with them and eventually speak with them. In general, our politicians who formed our national elite lived mostly distant from ordinary people. They were not always visible.

I volunteered to help Sinoeun update his party's bookkeeping. It was just a junior role and a part-time job. I did not know how the party could generate income. I only knew that another party leader, Chan Kim Cheang, provided money as often as needed. But, like in military training, I was not a regular party worker. I was supposed to come to work once a week; I came once a month. However, I managed to be free for a weekly breakfast with Chau Sau, Sinoeun, and others. We often went to the "Thmor Da" restaurant, where Chau Sau did not waste his time doing political propaganda. Even in the restaurant, he talked to everyone he met to introduce or advertise the Democrat Party, its objectives, its ideology, and its organisation.

The party held its weekly meeting regularly. Whenever I could, I joined, not to share any views or opinions, but just to listen to the comments the party leaders made on the military and political situation of the country. Usually, In Tam made his comments on the military and political situation, while Chau Sau made his on the country's economy. During these weekly meetings, I noticed some intellectuals who had spent time in the party and then secretly joined the maquis, giving their valuable support to the Khmer Rouge. Those intellectuals used the Democratic Party as a transit point.

Election Under Lon Nol Regime

In April 1972, Lon Nol organised a referendum in the area under his control to adopt a new constitution of the Khmer Republic. Until 1993, it was the first and the last time I had participated in an election in Cambodia. To tell the truth, I did not vote for this constitution. I was strongly opposed to the regime, so none of their political actions got my support. After the

proclamation of the new constitution, Lon Nol proposed holding the Presidential election. This time, I did not go to vote either, as I was disappointed with the regime. The Democratic Party nominated In Tam as its candidate. Another presidential candidate was Keo An, the Dean of the Law School. The Democratic Party conducted a successful campaign. With widespread support from the people, especially the youth, and under the party's popular leadership, every Democrat firmly believed that In Tam would win the election. But finally, the official result gave the victory to Lon Nol, even though vote counting in Phnom Penh had indicated a clear success for the Democratic Party's candidate. That evening, Sinoeun and I went to In Tam's house. We were planning to celebrate the election victory. But ballots from most provinces, all under tight military control, favoured Lon Nol, whose title was now Mr Marshal. Lon Nol had been promoted to marshal by In Tam and his fellow parliamentarians in 1971.

Ex-Lon Nol's Allies Attempted to Re-Unite

Marshal Lon Nol was proclaimed President of the Khmer Republic in June 1972. But his Khmer Republic had been very much weakened, facing increasing Khmer Rouge military pressure on the ground. Probably with US advice, Lon Nol tried to reunite his ex-partners in the coalition against Prince Sihanouk and to lure the opposition leadership, especially the Democrat Party, into his camp. Douc Rasy was finally given an ambassadorship to London. Many Democrats criticised him for always siding with the people in power, even when he had to fight them. They said his theory was to fight from the inside. But, in general, once one is installed in power, he/she becomes comfortable with power.

In the end, In Tam ultimately agreed to become Prime Minister of the Lon Nol government. He decided to join Lon Nol without the approval of his colleagues on the party board, which ultimately cost him his expulsion from the Democrat Party. Since that day, Chau Sau had taken complete control over the party. In

the 1940s, one of its founders, former Prime Minister Sim Var, was also expelled from the presidency.

The Democrats Wanted to Build A Bridge Between Warring Parties

A few months before I left Cambodia for France, Chau Sau used to drive his Citroen 2CW, carrying us, Sinoeun and me, as well as his other colleagues, to tour the city of Phnom Penh. It was the occasion for us to exchange views on how we would govern the country if the Democrat Party were to rise to power. At one time, we raised the issue of corruption, as it had gnawed at our society and seriously menaced our future. The solution was not easy. One of us jokingly opined that capital punishment for the culprits was the sole answer. But inside our minds, we never thought of killing anyone for corruption. On the contrary, the Khmer Rouge was using killing as a method of governing. Most of

the population of the Lon Nol regime had been killed by the Khmer Rouge since the first day they took power.

The Democrats also tried to build a bridge between the Khmer Republic of Lon Nol and the other side led by Prince Sihanouk. At the time, many people in Phnom Penh, as well as somewhere else, perhaps including Prince Sihanouk, believed that the real leader of the Khmer Rouge was Khieu Samphan. At first, I believed the same. I also wanted to join his front. Revealing my plan to leave Cambodia, I asked Chau Sau for his advice on what he would think if, from Paris, I were to join Prince Sihanouk's front. Chau Sau advised me not to take such a foolish decision, as he knew that Prince Sihanouk or Khieu Samphan did not really lead the Khmer Rouge organisation. He also did not tell me about Saloth Sar, alias Pol Pot. Chau Sau gave me a brief account of the Indochinese communist movement's history. He said, "Many real leaders of the communist movement had always stayed in the dark until the day they took power. He also gave me some examples of how communist chiefs eliminated each other through different methods of assassination. Chau Sau strongly

recommended that I remain neutral and make every effort to build up a broad public relations network.

Sinoeun tried his best to keep in touch with my uncle, who was serving as a district chief of the People Revolutionary Committee, “Kanak Srok” in the Khmer Rouge organisation of my native district.” I did not know whether he had a mandate from the Democratic Party to bridge the two sides of the war. But it seemed to be party policy to end the conflict through negotiation. He sent a short message to my uncle twice, but received no answer. To Sinoeun’s third message, my uncle replied with the following words: “Don’t take any action and be quiet.” In 1977, my uncle was arrested and assassinated by the Khmer Rouge.

Son Sann, the man who was appointed Minister of Finance in the first democratic government in December 1946, just a few years before I was born, and who became my boss during our struggle against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia in the 1980s, also tried to play a bridging role. With many years of loyal service to Prince Sihanouk and a personal, good relationship with Lon Nol, he might have thought his peace initiative could work. At

the beginning of the conflict, he attempted to negotiate with Lon Nol for Prince Sihanouk's return to Phnom Penh. Lon Nol, still a strongman, refused to deal with him. Later, as the situation worsened, Lon Nol agreed to negotiate, but Prince Sihanouk, from Beijing, refused. It was Cambodia's inescapable fate. As many Cambodians believed, our history might be written by a mighty power, and the country might pass through decades of darkness. They believed it was out of reach for our fellow human beings. But I realised that this was due to the particular character of the Cambodian leaders. When one felt strong, he/she did not need to make a compromise. I saw the same behaviour of our leaders when it was time to negotiate the peace settlement in the 1980s. Without pressure from their backers, the Cambodian antagonists would continue to fight to their mutual death.

The Failure of the Lon Nol Regime

The victory of the Khmer Rouge over the regime of Lon Nol in April 1975 was an event that announced the disastrous affliction which the Cambodian people and nation had to endure for three years, eight months, and twenty days before the invasion of the Vietnamese troops. This victory resulted from several factors. On one hand, the regime was decayed and incapable of surviving without external aid. This proved to be true to such an extent that the US disengagement from Vietnam could only precipitate the fall of Lon Nol's regime or the Khmer Republic.

On the other hand, the Khmer Rouge benefited from a strong international socialist solidarity in the Cold War, and they proved their capacity for organisation and internal control of the country. In addition, Prince Sihanouk's contribution to the Khmer Rouge was considerable.

The Khmer Republic was in a state of extreme political weakness, and later a military one. Immediately after Prince Sihanouk was removed from power, and as the country entered a

war that became increasingly destructive, the regime lacked manoeuvring room and could not mobilise the necessary resources. On the contrary, political games only increased national discord rather than strengthening and consolidating unity, which the regime greatly needed during the crisis. Hence, it faced opposition from royalists, communists, and even its own people. Anarchy emerged and was joined by corruption, which became the major cause of its fall.

In the military, the republican army was grouped into large units and stationed in barracks to defend the principal cities and the capital, Phnom Penh. The units used movement tactics during the day and rested at night. The Khmer Rouge did the contrary. They controlled the villages, which served as administrative units in Cambodia, and carried out their military operations at night. They overran the barracks, cut the supply lines, and liberated the countryside to finally surround the cities. While the military chiefs of the Lon Nol Army, who very often did not take part personally in the battles, passed their time enriching themselves through corruption, the common soldiers became demoralised. They

brought their wives and children with them to the battle lines. For their part, the Khmer Rouge never concealed their efforts to overthrow the Lon Nol regime and to exercise their power in the liberated zones.

Khmer Rouge's Ruse to Win the War

In areas where their authority was not yet very strong, the Khmer Rouge used a policy of charm and the name of Prince Sihanouk when dealing with the population. That is why they did not hesitate to offer their services to the villagers – to help the peasants cultivate the land, tend the animals, find water for the household, clean the house, and take care of sick people, for example.

And if one of their soldiers took an object or ate some fruit or vegetables from the property of one of the villagers without being able to ask his permission, the Khmer Rouge did not forget to

leave a little note with a friendly word or some money for the owner. Through such small acts, they won the war. In other villages, the Khmer Rouge used force and terror to impose their authority, combined with psychological warfare, broadly supported by communist propaganda.

In addition, the propaganda focused on a war of national liberation against the “US imperialists” and their “lackeys,” led by a traditionally legitimate chief, Prince Sihanouk. The prince was still considered the natural and legitimate chief of the Cambodians, following Cambodia's monarchist tradition, and he knew the feelings of the Cambodian peasants, whom he called “le Petit Peuple” or “the Little People,” and how to win their support in his speeches.

In playing those games, the prince could not have been ignorant of the fact that one day the Khmer Rouge might throw him away like a “cherry kernel,” according to his own words; he used to characterise his collaboration with the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Yet perhaps his personal hatred of the Lon Nol regime and the republicans drove him to collaborate with the Khmer Rouge, or

maybe the prince saw no other way to play a predominant political role in Cambodian affairs than by standing by the communists. And the Khmer Rouge finally acted. They did not allow the prince, as the Chief of State, to return immediately to Cambodia after their joint victory. He had to wait until September 1975 to be able to make a brief visit to Phnom Penh before delivering a speech, on behalf of the Khmer Rouge, at the United Nations. He definitively returned to Cambodia in December 1975 to serve as an honorific Chief of State until he resigned on April 2, 1976.

By the sheer originality of their brutality, the Khmer Rouge made their regime one of the bloodiest in the world. The genocide, or even more appropriately the auto-genocide, they committed in Cambodia, raised as much indignation as condemnation across the world. Apart from their special methods of physical elimination of their opponents, many points reflect the characteristics of the communist totalitarian system: education in hatred, the destruction of the family, the destruction of traditional society and old civilisation, the mock enemy, the new man of the new society, the omnipotent party and its nomenclature, etc.

During their rule, the Khmer Rouge not only decimated millions of Cambodian lives, but they also killed the Cambodian soul. Much literature has described, with telling details, the methodical and systematic destruction of Cambodian culture, tradition, civilisation, and way of life, not to mention the suppression of the most elementary human rights and dignity. I was probably one of a few whose destiny was preserved by living outside the Khmer Rouge's control. But like almost every Cambodian family, I did suffer the loss of many of my loved ones at the hands of the Khmer Rouge's regime. My father died in December 1975 from starvation. My elder brothers, Chhoeun, Sinoeun, and two younger brothers, Naroen and Vuthean, were sent to "training camps" and were reported killed by the Khmer Rouge in 1977.

This Cambodian Tragedy Must Be Remembered Forever As One Lesson of History

This section of our modern history is dominated by unspeakable suffering, wars, and destruction. However, future generations of Cambodians should draw lessons from those unfortunate events. The first lesson Cambodians must learn is how to reconcile, to coexist, and to respect adversity. In the past, Cambodian leaders inherited a culture of absolute power. They did not know how to balance or share power.

When Cambodia fell into internal conflict, Cambodian brother-enemies were rarely able to reconcile. The winner never agreed to coexist with the loser, so the loser, if not dead, had no other choice but to wait for the right time to seek revenge. The winner usually believed that his/her victory was irreversible. Consequently, he/she was not prepared to make a compromise or to forgive. Similarly, the loser never recognised his/her defeat once he/she found a safe haven. In revenge, the loser always asked foreigners to get involved in internal disputes, especially between the two

neighbours, Thailand or Vietnam, depending on the circumstances. The neighbours were repeatedly asked to help reconquer the power he/she had lost. Each time, they were so generous and ready to help the Cambodians fight each other to death. They eventually profited from the Cambodian infighting and weakness.

According to the teachings of Lord Buddha, nothing is fixed and permanent in this changing world. Victory or defeat, success or failure, is subject to change. So, winners and losers should make a compromise and reconcile.

Another important lesson Cambodians must learn is to take full responsibility for their actions. In the events of the collapse of Cambodia in the 1970s, or the fall of Lon Nol's regime and the rise of the Khmer Rouge to power in 1975, not many Cambodian leaders accepted their responsibility. They just put the blame for the Cambodian tragedy on others. Prince Sihanouk blamed Lon Nol for the March 1970 coup against him, which plunged the country into decades of war and destruction. Lon Nol, in turn, was blamed by his supporters for the fall of the Khmer Republic. Many

of his former generals I met in the 1980s did not concede or accept their own failure, except to blame their chief, Lon Nol. For their part, the Khmer Rouge leaders rejected their responsibility for the mass murder of the Cambodian people. They just accused the secret Vietnamese agents of sabotage.

One important point we must not forget: no government can survive without the people's support. The Khmer Rouge just ignored this basic law. They did not care about the well-being of their citizens. They not only disregarded human rights but also violated them. They practically employed lying and mass-murder methods to govern. In their rhetoric, the Khmer Rouge painted themselves as patriotic, genuinely nationalist, making every sacrifice for the nation and for the people. Behind this curtain of beautiful words, they killed or starved their own people to death. Without the support of the people, the Khmer Rouge's regime did not last long. They were removed from power after three years, eight months, and twenty days of absolute totalitarian rule.

Last but not least, the lesson to be learned is to give historians the task, the freedom, and the right to write our history

independently. In the past, our leaders made many attempts to rewrite history so that their person, their actions, or their regime could be glorified to the point where they altered the truth and destroyed the tracks that marked their predecessors, adversaries, or enemies.

In drawing lessons from the past, it is useful to face the future with a sense of reality. I write this chapter to underline the enormity of the devastation, hoping that the deadly price the Cambodian people paid during those events will help transform loss into an asset in philosophy, conceptual thinking, moral principles, and behaviour so that past misfortune will not be repeated. I also hope that the high cost of our mistakes, failure, or weakness will help form a new consciousness that will guarantee a promising future for Cambodian generations to come. By writing this chapter, I am fully aware of the insignificant contribution I can make to the process. But I am proud to do my part, as a Cambodian worthy of its name, who has witnessed the resurrection of peace and the rebirth of a nation.