



RISING ASIA
JOURNAL



RISING ASIA
FOUNDATION

NORODOM RANARIDDH
January 1944–November 2021

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The Exilic Life of a Cambodian Warrior Prince

The author of this tribute wrote the only full-length, authorized biography of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, son of Norodom Sihanouk, in 2001. Here, he reflects on the life of a prince who skimmed the heights of political power, went into premature decline, and staged a remarkable resurrection.

In the combustible politics of his country, Norodom Ranariddh was arguably the most accomplished of King Norodom Sihanouk's fourteen children from his six wives. Prince Ranariddh's life mind-mapped the tragedies and triumphs of the kingdom of Cambodia, its trajectory dictated by the contortions of the nation's history. In troubling national circumstances, many of his royal siblings did not perform as well in politics, confining themselves to royal duties,

RISING ASIA JOURNAL.
VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1 (WINTER/SPRING) JANUARY TO APRIL 2022.
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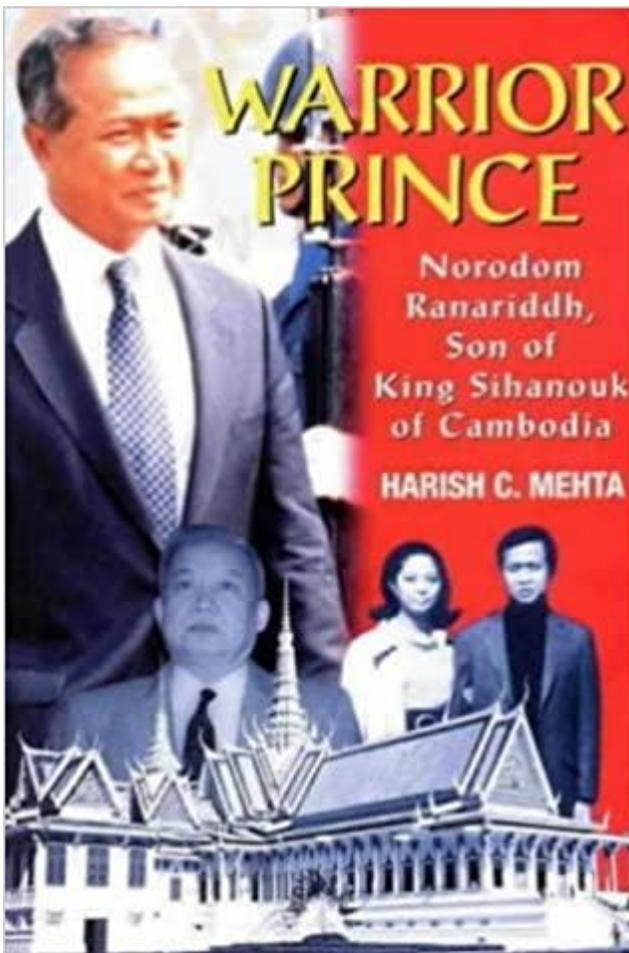
business, and national service. Ranariddh's political career soared during the United Nations-supervised election of May 1993 that launched him on the national stage, when he took his Funcinpec Party to victory. Under duress, he joined a fractious power-sharing arrangement that saw him become the First Prime Minister in an uneasy power-sharing alliance with the Second Prime Minister, Hun Sen. Just a few years later, Ranariddh was overthrown in a coup that was predicted, but he defied forecasts of his political demise to stage a rapid resurrection.

For my biography on the life of Ranariddh, I interviewed him in great depth—eighteen hours of candid conversations in ten sittings over seven days between November 18 and 27, 1997, at his residence in Bangkok where he was in exile just four months after his overthrow in July of the same year by his coalition partner, Hun Sen. After the interviews were done, I proposed sending him the manuscript before it went to press. A few months later his aides telephoned me several times to ask how the book was shaping up. Two years later, with Ranariddh back in Phnom Penh, I sent him an early draft by courier in October 1999, and another draft in July 2000. He made no comment, adding nothing, subtracting nothing. *Ni plus, ni moins*. When I conducted a final interview with Ranariddh in May 2001 in Phnom Penh, he said, “When you sent me the transcript of the interviews, I did not respond because I wanted you to have complete freedom of expression in what you were writing.” It was an authorized biography, one in which he participated but did not intervene.

The Palace Woes and French Education of a Separated Child

The Ranariddhs were a charming couple with an urbane sense of humor, exuding good breeding and education. The prince, balding

prematurely and usually dressed in blazer or designer suit, his voice rising in a strong French–Cambodian accent to make a point, turning from reflective to agitated, while Princess Marie, his wife, never needing to raise an octave, preferred to merely arch an eyebrow. At our first interview, he said, “I will talk frankly about my father.” What Ranariddh went on to say was not always pleasant: the unbotting of the unvarnished truth was liberating.



The front cover of the biography of Ranariddh, *Warrior Prince* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 2001).

Soon after birth, the child named Ranariddh, meaning One Who is Mighty in War, was not allowed to stay with his mother because she was a commoner, instead he was placed under the care of his grandaunt. Such were the ways of the palace. He was separated from his mother, Neak Moneang Phat Kanhol, who was the prima ballerina in the Royal Ballet troupe in the palace of King Sihanouk. Through his life Sihanouk had six wives, princesses and commoners, that bore fourteen children. The child faced an unbearable pain of separation stoically as he was adopted by his father's aunt, Princess Rasmi Sobhana, a younger sister of Ranariddh's paternal grandfather, Norodom Suramarit, who would become king upon Sihanouk's abdication in 1955 to enter politics. Ranariddh's sister, Princess Buppha Devi, the princess Who is As Beautiful as Flowers, older than him by a year, was adopted by their grandmother Queen Sisowath Kossamak Nearireath, who was the daughter of Sisowath Monivong who had become king in 1927. Like her prima ballerina mother, Buppha Devi became a star performer of Cambodian classical dance and a minister.

The young prince Ranariddh rarely visited his mother because Princess Rasmi Sobhana discouraged it. At the start, she did not want the child to know that Kanhol was his real mother, wanting him to believe that she, Rasmi Sobhana, was his real mother, but when he was a little older the palace allowed him to visit his mother. "I never had real parents. Neither a real father, nor a real mother. My father as king was very, very distant," he had told me.¹ The child was cocooned in a superficial relationship with a father who made himself available at communal lunches thrown for the benefit of his fourteen children and

¹ Harish C. Mehta, *Warrior Prince: Norodom Ranariddh, Son of King Sihanouk of Cambodia* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 2001),3.

the extended royal family. There was no possibility for any personal, individualized warmth to develop between father and child.

As Ranariddh grew, Sihanouk had a disagreement with his mother, Queen Kossamak, over the child's education. The Queen doted on the boy for whom she wanted school education befitting a prince in France, where she reckoned he would get much better schooling than in Cambodia. Even though Sihanouk had studied in Paris, he did not support the idea because much of his own secondary education was obtained at elite French schools in Saigon and Phnom Penh. The Queen's will prevailed. Ranariddh was sent to school in Marseille, France, in 1958 at the age of fourteen. Accompanying him was his half-brother, Prince Norodom Chakrapong, whose name literally meant One Who Belongs to the Lineage of the Chakra of Vishnu. The pair left Lycée Descartes in Phnom Penh and arrived at the boarding school in Marseille where they grew really close, sleeping next to each other in the hall, and returning home once a year for the holidays, a special voyage that was permitted if they passed their exams.

As the school years in Marseille came to an end, Ranariddh was attached to the idea of becoming a surgeon, being good in science subjects and weak in mathematics, but Queen Kossamak discouraged him, saying, "Why? You are a king's son, why should you study medicine. You should go to the faculty of law and study law."²

Acting on the advice of his loving *grand-mère*, after graduating from high school in 1961 he entered the law faculty at the University of Paris. The move from the provincial town of Marseille to the metropolis of Paris proved to be distracting for Ranariddh who, by his own admission, earned a reputation as a playboy that neglected his studies. At this time Sihanouk suddenly arrived at the university to deliver a

² Ibid, 14.

speech. Ranariddh's professors and the dean were very embarrassed because how were they to tell the head of state that his son had not succeeded in his exams. Ranariddh then left the university and moved to Aix-en-Provence, a small, quiet town of pretty fountains and trees that was decidedly more conducive for studies, registering in the faculty of law, earning bachelor's and master's degrees and eventually a doctorate in law. At first, he lived in a university hostel, and later rented what he called was "a very small room in a very small house owned by a French family."³ He lived on the scholarship funds that the Cambodian government extended to students abroad, but he failed to get additional money from the Royal Palace. When Queen Kossamak tried to get Sihanouk to release some extra funds in 1965, "the king replied to her in a written note, refusing permission," Ranariddh recalled.⁴ Sihanouk's refusal hurt Ranariddh deeply.

The young law student now encountered the hypocrisy of French education. "What hurt me was the clear difference between what the French were teaching us in France—democracy, pluralism and so on—and their policies in Cambodia," Ranariddh told me. "When they ruled Cambodia, they did not want the locals to be graduates. They did not build a lot of universities in Cambodia."⁵ In order to understand the ways of governing a country, he specialized in constitutional law and political science, rather than in civil law.

In the classroom, his French professors were critical of Sihanouk's state, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, but Ranariddh believed their views were divorced from reality because the government had

³ Ibid, 19.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 20.



made significant achievements. The scholar Serge Thion explains in his essay, “The Cambodian Idea of Revolution,” that “the French were very slow in establishing an original education system in Cambodia.”⁶ The first French school started in the 1880s catering mainly to Chinese and Vietnamese children. In 1905, no more than five hundred Khmer children were attending French protectorate schools, and a *lycée* was not set up in Phnom Penh until the 1930s. History was taught with no adaptation to local conditions so that future citizens and colonial subjects would identify with French history and political values. The colonialists imposed upon the Cambodians the history of France with the French Revolution serving as a defining moment in time. The absence of the teaching of Cambodian history confused local students who found it difficult to comprehend the history of France and Europe.

From a great distance in France, Ranariddh could not foresee the coming of the coup against Sihanouk, but he was aware that Cambodian officials such as General Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak were growing alienated from Sihanouk’s policy of rejecting American military aid in 1963, the signing of a military pact with China in 1965, allowing the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam to station troops on Cambodian soil, and letting the North Vietnamese run their supply route through Cambodia. Still, few could forecast that Sihanouk would be ousted by his own government officials.

A Royal Wedding, the Coup, and the Sihanouk-led Resistance

As dark clouds of intrigue swirled, love entered the life of Ranariddh at a traffic light at a crossroads in Phnom Penh. He had come back home

⁶ Serge Thion, “The Cambodian Idea of Revolution,” in *Revolution and its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays*, ed. David P. Chandler and Ben Kiernan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1983).

for the annual holidays in the summer of 1968 and was driving around the city. At the traffic light, when he glanced at the car next to his, he saw a beautiful young woman sitting in the backseat. She was Marie Eng, a twenty-year-old Cambodian woman of Chinese descent. “It was the first time that I saw her, thanks to the red light,” he said at one of our early interviews. Marie added in an interview with the scholar of Cambodian culture, Julie Mehta, the author of *Dance of Life: The Mythology, History, and Politics of Cambodian Culture*, “At the time, I was with my mother. We had most probably gone to the airport to welcome someone.” Marie was studying in Lyon and had come back home for the holidays. The gap in their status, and royal protocol, prevented him from approaching her as she was the daughter of an official of the ministry of interior. “I sent my people to see her parents,” he said. Sihanouk’s reaction was favorable. “When I introduced her to my father, he encouraged us to get married. He told her ‘You have to be very careful of my son Ranariddh because he used to change his girlfriends every holiday.’ It was more or less true,” Ranariddh said with a chuckle. Marie met Ranariddh’s mother, Kanhol, who presented her with the fabric for the wedding dress. “That was a great help because I didn’t expect the wedding to be at such short notice and I couldn’t find the fabric that I wanted,” Marie told Julie who interviewed her for the Ranariddh biography.

They were married on September 14, 1968, a royal event that stretched from early morning till the evening. The newly weds returned to start a new life as students in France, but the money the Royal Palace provided was not enough to cover their expenses. When Queen Kossamak asked Sihanouk if she could exchange some of her own



money for the couple at the official rate which was more favorable than the higher black-market rate, he refused in writing, in red ink.⁷

They returned to Phnom Penh in early 1970, and within weeks Marie gave birth to their first son, Chakravuth, in January. Ranariddh had completed the first part of his doctoral dissertation on the law of the sea with a special focus on the maritime boundary between Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. He began sourcing documents at the ministry of interior, and even found a job at the ministry equivalent to a secretary's post. At the same time, he began teaching at the faculty of law in Phnom Penh. The young family now had enough money.

The peaceful existence that they had hoped for eluded them. Just three months after their return, Sihanouk was toppled in a coup on March 18 when he was visiting Europe and the Soviet Union, forcing him to take refuge in China. After the coup, the new Lon Nol regime victimized Ranariddh even though he had nothing to do with Sihanouk's policies. He lost both his jobs within days of the coup.

Ranariddh did not sit idly. He began helping the jungle-based resistance to restore his father to power. He contributed funds to the resistance to print leaflets against Lon Nol, and provided medicines to the fighters in the countryside. His activities got him into trouble with the regime. He was arrested and jailed the following year on charges of working for the resistance. Chakrapong and other members of the Norodom and Sisowath families were also jailed at the same location in the Tuol Kruk area of the capital for allegedly attempting to topple the government. Through the difficult period when Sihanouk was in exile, Marie and her two sons (Sihariddh was born in 1972) lived in fear in a house not far from a military prison where Ranariddh was jailed, and

⁷ *Warrior Prince*, 23.

later and tried in court. Three months later he was released, probably under American pressure, he said.

In the countryside the Khmer Rouge movement was sinking roots. Khmer Rouge operatives made contact with Ranariddh, wooing him to join their movement to liberate the country. But Ranariddh declined because not only did he find their extreme left-wing ideology very worrisome, but going into the jungle would have interrupted his doctoral work. As his father wanted him to join the Khmer Rouge, Ranariddh avoided going to Beijing to stay with him.

He returned to Aix-en-Provence with Marie and their two young sons to work on his dissertation which was eventually completed in 1976 in challenging circumstances of supporting his family without Cambodian government funds that had been cut off. He was able to lease his house in Phnom Penh to the Australian Embassy, the rental income serving as their only source of money from 1973 till the time he found a good teaching job in France in 1979.

Ranariddh met Sihanouk for the first time since the coup during his visit to Beijing in April 1975 to attend the funeral ceremony of Queen Kossamak who had been very sick. Phnom Penh had fallen to the Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk spoke exultingly of the victory of the insurgents in black pajamas and the “defeat” of U.S. imperialism. Sihanouk received Ranariddh coldly: he had not forgiven him for not joining him and the Khmer Rouge leaders in Beijing soon after the coup. Still, Sihanouk was happy to meet Ranariddh, though he was skeptical that he had been helping the resistance, and he did not believe that the Khmer Rouge had begun killing people. “I did not join him in Beijing because I did not want to be responsible for any of the Khmer Rouge killings,” Ranariddh said with the wisdom of hindsight.



The meeting with Sihanouk was brief because the funeral ceremony of Queen Kossamak was going on.

When Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge, Ranariddh lost his house that had given him a steady rental income as well as the family's possessions. Marie's parents, seven siblings, and fourteen nephews were killed by black-clad insurgents. At this convulsive historical moment, he defended his dissertation successfully, becoming Dr. Ranariddh. It was a miracle that he could complete the dissertation amid the mass killings back home.

They now had three children, their daughter Rattana Devi was born in 1974, all of whom attended school close to their apartment in Aix-en-Provence. With no hope of returning home, Ranariddh was forced to take French citizenship in order to be appointed a lecturer at the University of Aix-en-Provence in 1979. Soon he began earning a regular salary.

Eventually, the Pol Pot regime was overthrown by Vietnamese-backed Cambodian rebels in 1979. Soon afterwards the Vietnamese government sent feelers to Ranariddh to have him defect to the newly-installed Heng Samrin regime that had created a pro-Hanoi government in Phnom Penh. The embassy of Vietnam in Paris made contact with Ranariddh, paving the way for a Vietnamese official to meet him. At the meeting, the official invited him to join the new regime.⁸ Ranariddh's joining the new government would lend it some legitimacy. It was too much to ask of him to oppose the Khmer Rouge who still remained close to his father. Taking up arms against the Khmer Rouge would have meant turning against his father. Ranariddh heard the Vietnamese, but he declined.

⁸ Ibid, 59.

After promising to abstain from politics, Sihanouk decided to reclaim power that was snatched from him eleven years ago. For this express purpose, he created a new political party, Funcinpec, separate and distinct from the Khmer Rouge, whom he relegated to pariah status. He launched Funcinpec in Pyongyang in 1981 in order to wrest the country back from the control of the pro-Vietnamese regime, whose main personalities were Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and Hun Sen. Ranariddh wrote to his father, requesting him to induct him as a member.⁹ He flew to Pyongyang to meet his father but was nonplussed to see him form a united front with the Khmer Rouge, and the much more acceptable leader, Son Sann, to oppose the ruling Heng Samrin regime. It appeared that Sihanouk had been compelled to cooperate with the Khmer Rouge under pressure from Beijing that had refused to help him unless he formed a united front with the guerrillas. As he watched his father align himself with the Khmer Rouge, Ranariddh's enthusiasm to join the Sihanouk-led resistance gave way to skepticism. He again refused to join a tripartite Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea—formed in Kuala Lumpur in June 1982 with Sihanouk as head of state, Son Sann as prime minister, and Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan as vice-president—precisely because of the presence of the genocidal Khmer Rouge.

But when Sihanouk pressed him, Ranariddh relented in mid-1983. Sihanouk sent him a long telegram to Aix-en-Provence in which he asked him to temporarily leave his job and join Funcinpec and the *Armée Nationale Sihanoukienne*, the armed forces of Funcinpec. Ranariddh agreed. He had bought a three-bedroom apartment on a twenty-year mortgage, and he applied for a two-year sabbatical, which

⁹ Ibid, 65.



the faculty granted. The family rented out their apartment and moved to Bangkok in July 1983, taking up residence in a rented apartment on Soi Prapinij, off Sathorn Road. Living in the relative safety of Bangkok, just an hour by air from Phnom Penh, he could keep an eye on the Heng Samrin regime. Beginning with his first designation as the personal representative of Sihanouk, he gradually grew accustomed to being part of the coalition government-in-exile with the Khmer Rouge.

At this time, Chakrapong began playing an important role in the coalition government, accompanying his father for talks with Thai leaders, and working as the public health minister. Ranariddh had not formally joined Funcinpec as yet. But soon, Ranariddh began traveling with Sihanouk, and Chakrapong was seen less often by his side. Sihanouk did not neglect Chakrapong's aspirations, appointing him deputy chief of staff of the *Armée Nationale Sihanoukienne* under Ranariddh who became the supreme commander.

The Intriguing Wooing of Ranariddh, and the Paris Conference

Peace talks began in France in December 1987 between Sihanouk and Hun Sen who was the foreign minister of the Heng Samrin regime that renamed itself the State of Cambodia in 1989. At the first meeting in Fère-en-Tardenois, a thirteenth century château in northern France, Ranariddh was admitted as an aide to Sihanouk, but he was kept out of the next round because, he believed, Hun Sen had refused to let him participate. "My father agreed with him [Hun Sen]. To be frank, I was not very happy with the decision made by my father because Hun Sen always obtained what he asked my father for."¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid, 78.

Intriguingly, around this time the Heng Samrin regime sent a seasoned diplomat, Hor Nam Hong, to get Ranariddh to defect over to its side.¹¹ Hor offered a high position to Ranariddh, but he politely refused.

Sihanouk suddenly resigned his position as the president of Funcinpec in August 1989 in order to elevate himself above partisan politics in the final lap of the Paris peace talks between the warring factions, leaving his wife, Monique, and General Nhiek Tioulong as the two heads of the party, and Ranariddh as secretary general. Monique and Nhiek were figureheads as Ranariddh anyway was at the center of diplomatic activity.

The charm offensive of the State of Cambodia continued in high gear. After the Paris Peace Accords were signed in October 1991, Prime Minister Hun Sen asked to see Ranariddh at a hotel close to the conference center where the peace talks were held in the French capital. The two men were, at the time, exploring the possibility for their parties to forge a strategic alliance aimed at bringing about political stability. Ranariddh said in an interview with this author, “Hun Sen proposed giving me two residences, one next to the National Stadium, and another one in Phnom Penh city.”¹² Ranariddh declined. “How could my wife and I take a residence that did not belong to us. My own residence, where I was born, was occupied by the Russian ambassador, but I did not try to get it back.” The next day, Hun Sen came back with a new offer, to return to Princess Marie the two residences that belonged to her but were now occupied by the ministry of interior. They accepted the offer, and Hun Sen instructed his officials to renovate the two residences. One of the homes became the official

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 84.



residence of the Ranariddh family with an annex housing his cabinet, and the other served as the Funcinpec party office.

As Ranariddh campaigned across the country for his party, Sihanouk delivered a blow to his aspirations just weeks before the general election of May 1993. In a North Korean aircraft, in midflight, Sihanouk urged him to not run in the election and to join Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP, the new name of the SOC) instead, even recommending the merger of Funcinpec with the CPP.¹³ Ranariddh said reflectively in our interview, "It was terrible for me. Before the election my father told Prince Norodom Sirivudh [Sihanouk's half-brother and senior Funcinpec member], 'please tell your boss [Ranariddh] that in a Monte Carlo casino there used to be a revolver, and if you won, you won, but if you lost, the casino provided the loser with the pistol.' It was a terrible message."¹⁴

Surprisingly to many political observers, Ranariddh's popularity was on the upswing and he overhauled Sihanouk's bleak assessment of his weakness. At an election rally at the Olympic Stadium, Ranariddh was greeted enthusiastically by thousands of people, but when CPP leader Chea Sim went there, the people's enthusiasm was missing.

Sihanouk's dire prediction of a Funcinpec defeat was off the mark. Ranariddh led his party to victory, but he was disappointed that the trophy would not be his alone. He protested. But he was coerced into accepting a power-sharing arrangement. At the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly tasked with writing a new Constitution, Sihanouk congratulated Ranariddh's victory in his speech, but advised that there should not be any winner or loser, and all the parties should work together for the benefit of the country. On June 3, Sihanouk

¹³ Ibid, 94.

¹⁴ Ibid, 95.

announced the creation of an interim government with himself as prime minister with Ranariddh and Hun Sen as his deputies, in disregard for the United Nations' election process that called upon the winner of the election, Ranariddh, to form a new government. Ranariddh rejected the new interim government. Soon, Sihanouk abandoned his interim government plan, and took oath as king in September 1993. Inter-party negotiations led to the creation of a new coalition government with an unprecedented system of two prime ministers: Ranariddh as First Prime Minister, and Hun Sen as the Second Prime Minister. The CPP, exercising control of the military, police, and administration, would have it no other way. The UN watched lamely, powerless to intervene.

The Ranariddh-Hun Sen relationship started amicably, soon turning frosty and then unworkable. Ranariddh complained incessantly that Hun Sen blocked all his reform proposals. As they fell out, Ranariddh's prime ministership lasted less than four years in which he traveled the world drumming up much-needed foreign investments, while at home his leadership brought peace after more than twenty years of civil war, the people began learning about democracy, and Cambodia developed arguably the freest press in Southeast Asia. The major achievement of his tenure was the healthy economic situation that won praise from the International Monetary Fund.

The political waters were deceptively still. In July 1997, Hun Sen's military forces launched a coup overthrowing Ranariddh, accusing his party of building an independent armed force. It ended badly following pitched battles between the two armies on the streets of Phnom Penh. Removed from office, Ranariddh went into exile in France, leaving the national political space for Hun Sen to invite Ung Huot, a Funcinpec party leader who had worked under Ranariddh, to



become the First Prime Minister. Ung Huot's short year-long stint as the prime minister paved the way for Hun Sen to become the First Prime Minister.

In the end, Ranariddh was a standout. He was Sihanouk's only child to emerge a national leader, and the only one with the grit to obtain a doctoral degree. Yet, the Ranariddh prime ministership was held hostage to his working relationship with Hun Sen. Matching the ineptness of the UN, a powerless Sihanouk did not, or could not, intervene to support his son.

After a brief spell in exile following his overthrow, Ranariddh went on to become the president of the National Assembly, leaving his imprint on the country—he had served as the head of the first democratically-elected government in more than three decades. He had held power fleetingly, in a brief dream cameo, compared to Sihanouk's fifteen-year political career as head of government. Ranariddh's political career was miniscule compared to Hun Sen's, who continues as prime minister at the present moment. Although Ranariddh was more pragmatic than his father in some respects, and avoided some of his parent's extreme positions, his tenure was short.

King Sihanouk's lengthy response to *Warrior Prince*

Following the publication of my book, *Warrior Prince*, King Sihanouk issued no less than twelve press releases rebutting parts of the text. The news was reported by all the main news agencies, Reuters, Agence France Presse, Associated Press, and the regional and international press. It is difficult to cite all of the King's arguments for reasons of space (his press releases are available on various public websites), but I shall mention just two of them that appeared in the pro-palace *The Cambodia Daily* newspaper. On October 1, 2001, *The Cambodia Daily*

reported that Sihanouk was continuing his attacks against the book *Warrior Prince*, saying that it was “deforming” the historical record.¹⁵ In his fourth letter to the public regarding *Warrior Prince*, Sihanouk accused the author of taking “the part of the Americans against me, thus deforming out of necessity historical facts that are perfectly established.” *The Cambodia Daily* commented, “In the book, Mehta attributes the 1970 coup by Lon Nol, whose government was propped up by the U.S., to ‘Sihanouk’s highly flammable foreign policy of forging an alliance with North Vietnamese Communists.’” The report added, “Mehta called the King a “socialist” who “was a prisoner of his leftist ideology in whose blind pursuit he nationalized foreign trade” and who “reacted with unforgivable helplessness” as Cambodia’s economy declined and the country was sucked into the war in Vietnam.

In his letter, King Sihanouk explained that his rule, in fact, “gave a great deal of prestige and dignity to our nation, our race, and our people: We counted on ourselves for developing our country and all the domains of our national edification, we didn’t ask foreigners to give us loans and donations, we were not a beggar state nor a beggar people.” *The Cambodia Daily* reported that the book initially drew fire from the King for characterizing him as a cold and distant father who discouraged his son from challenging Prime Minister Hun Sen in the 1993 general election.

The next day, October 2, 2001, the same newspaper reported that King Sihanouk had “leveled a fifth written attack” against the biography of his son, *Warrior Prince*, disagreeing with the book’s portrayal of his own thoughts and conduct during the Khmer Rouge

¹⁵ John Gravois and Bill Myers, “King Lambastes Book on Son,” *The Cambodia Daily*, October 1, 2001. <https://english.cambodiadaily.com/news/king-lambastes-book-on-son-26204/>.



years.¹⁶ “It is not true that, after the victory of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia on April 17, 1975, I ‘hoped’ and ‘wanted’ to remain Chief of the Cambodian state and that, ‘against my wishes’ the Khmer Rouges ‘deposed me and took me prisoner,’” he said in the release. The newspaper reported that according to the book the Khmer Rouge “mollified Sihanouk with the assurance that he would be reinstated as head of state with full powers, only to betray him later,” and that Ranariddh said, “He felt very hurt by such treason.” *The Cambodia Daily* stated, “In this most recent missive, the King explained that while ‘conscious of the misfortune of [his] people,’ he wrote letters to the Khmer Rouge leadership in February and March 1976, asking for permission to retire from his position as Chief of State,” adding that “the King says that the Khmer Rouge asked him twice not to step down, but eventually accepted his resignation in April 1976.”

The newspaper continued, “The King rounded out this latest attack against *Warrior Prince* by saying that his return to Cambodia from Beijing in 1976 was not an attempt to regain power.” Moreover, the newspaper quoted the King saying, “It is odious and contemptible to accuse me of forgetting the tragic fate of my people, even as I myself became a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge.” The King added, “If I returned to Cambodia under ‘invitation’ of the Khmer Rouge organization, it was only to live and share fortune and misfortune with the people of my homeland, Cambodia.”

¹⁶ John Gravois, “King Continues Campaign Against Book on Ranariddh,” *The Cambodia Daily*, October 2, 2001. <https://english.cambodiadaily.com/news/king-continues-campaign-against-book-on-ranariddh-26247/>.

King Sihanouk almost reached the age of ninety when he passed away in October 2012 in Beijing, leaving behind anguished Cambodians who had lost their “papa king,” as well as a trail of unanswered questions and media sobriquets the BBC summarized as “unpredictable, ebullient, mercurial, autocratic, self-indulgent,” largely on account of his tendency to change his mind, and his volatile politics. The Cambodian government tirelessly implored the press to refrain from using such epithets, particularly the word “mercurial” that the King found offensive.

Prince Ranariddh passed away in November 2021, aged seventy-seven, survived by his wife, their two sons and daughter, and an incomplete vision for his country. Father and son were products and victims of colonialism, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. In their own way, they shaped their country, and continue to be revered by Cambodians.

Note on the Author

Harish C. Mehta holds a PhD from McMaster University in Canada in the history of American foreign relations and Southeast Asia, with specializations in the twentieth-century history of China, and Christian-Muslim Encounters in the Early Modern World. He did graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Cambodia Silenced: The Press Under Six Regimes* (White Lotus, Bangkok and Cheney, 1997); *Warrior Prince: Norodom Ranariddh, Son of King Sihanouk of Cambodia* (Graham Brash, Singapore, 2001); *Strongman: The Extraordinary Life of Hun Sen* (Marshall Cavendish, Singapore, 2013); and *People’s Diplomacy of Vietnam: Soft Power in the Resistance War, 1965-1972* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2019). His articles on Vietnamese diplomacy have appeared



in the academic journals *International History Review*, *Diplomatic History*, *Peace and Change*, *The Historian*, and *History Compass*, and his review articles have appeared in *H-Diplo*. He has taught history at McMaster, the University of Toronto, and Trent University. He has twice won the Samuel Flagg Bemis research award from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and other awards.