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Sihanouk's Support in Cambodia

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
6 October 1973

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SIHANOUK'S SUPPORT IN CAMBODIAKey Judgments

--There is no evidence of any groundswell of support for Sihanouk in Cambodia.

On The Communist Side

--The Khmer Communist leadership is opposed to Sihanouk, and only "supports" him for its own tactical reasons.

--There appears to be some pro-Sihanouk sentiment among the rank-and-file in the insurgency, but the Khmer Communists probably can keep it within bounds.

On The Government Side

--Although many of the peasants in the countryside undoubtedly are still loyal to Sihanouk, they will be helpless to support him in any meaningful way unless he returns to a position of power.

--There are some indications that dissatisfaction with the performance of the Lon Nol government has made Sihanouk more acceptable to some circles in Phnom Penh than he was a year ago.

--The bulk of the civil servants most likely do not have any strong emotions about Sihanouk one way or the other. The intelligentsia--journalists, educators, and students--currently

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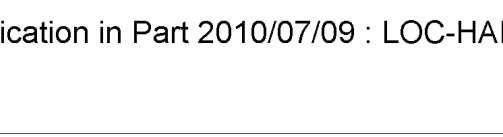
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seem to be looking at Sihanouk in a slightly more favorable light. There is probably residual support for Sihanouk in the Buddhist clergy.

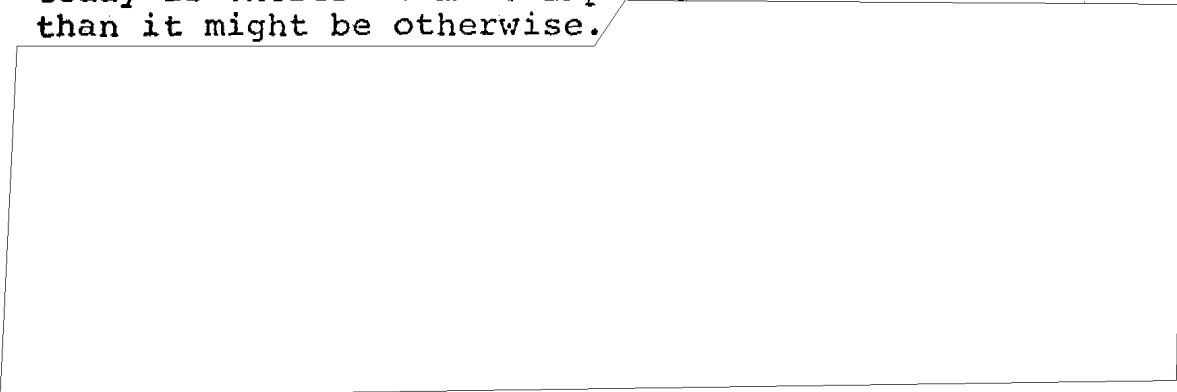
--Those relatively few members of the elite who engineered Sihanouk's ouster have not changed their views on the Prince.

--With a few exceptions, most Cambodian army officers below the top level and their troops would support Sihanouk if he returned.

--There is no evidence, however, that any officers, including those who have considered moving against Lon Nol, are contemplating action to return Sihanouk to power.


Introduction

The concept of political support is an amorphous one, even as it pertains to societies that are relatively open. Cambodia is not such a society. There are no public opinion polls in Cambodia and the expression of candid opinion is circumscribed in the conventional media. Sihanouk is a controversial figure in Cambodia, never more so than today. There is a natural reluctance on the part of people, both on the government and Communist side, to speak forthrightly or objectively about the Prince. The following assessment of Sihanouk's standing in Cambodia today is therefore more impressionistic and tentative than it might be otherwise.



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Sihanouk and the Khmer Communists

In drawing up a current balance sheet on Sihanouk, one logical point of departure is to review his standing with the leaders of the Khmer Communist movement-- who will probably be key figures in any future Cambodian settlement. The identities of most of these leaders and their true ranking within the Khmer Communist Party (KCP) have long been difficult to determine. What is clear, however, is that most of these leaders have a history of opposition to Sihanouk that stretches back twenty or more years. Exposed to Communist ideology as students in France, many of these leaders worked for Communist and leftist causes in Phnom Penh in the 1950s. Some were probably members or leaders of the Communist-front Pracheachon party that Sihanouk put out of business in the early 1960s. A number, including Saloth Sar who is reputedly

secretary-general of the KCP Central Committee, fled from Phnom Penh for the Cambodian countryside during one of Sihanouk's periodic anti-left purges. Others, including "defense minister" Khieu Samphan, made a similar flight during a 1967 purge. Although little is known about the whereabouts and activities of these men before Sihanouk's ouster in 1970, their present positions indicate that they made good use of their time in the shadowy "maquis" that was the forerunner of the present insurgency.

There is another group of Khmer Communist leaders who went to Hanoi directly after the end of the first Indochina War in 1954, and after Sihanouk had made it clear at Geneva that he would not legitimize the presence in Cambodia of an indigenous Communist movement. Some of these men returned to Cambodia in the late 1960s to assist the fledgling insurgent movement. Many others returned after Sihanouk's ouster in 1970 to help organize and run the greatly expanded and ambitious operation.

Whatever their differences, the Khmer Communists share a common background of opposition to Sihanouk the person, Sihanouk the symbol of all that is atavistic and wrong about Cambodia, and Sihanouk the adroit and unscrupulous political operator who would, and frequently did, screw them to the wall. They are suspicious of his intentions and his capability to make mischief; they are contemptuous of his pretensions and self-aggrandizement, and, probably more than a little fearful of what role he may play in the future.

The degree of antipathy toward Sihanouk may differ from one individual to another, as may judgments regarding the appropriateness of using Sihanouk as the figurehead of the movement, but no one among the Communists would support Sihanouk for other than tactical reasons, and no one of them would genuinely back Sihanouk's return to power if there were some palatable alternative.

Since March of 1970, they have recognized that their nominal "commander in chief" is useful as a

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rallying point for people in the Cambodian countryside and as an internationally known figure struggling to regain his country from "foreign imperialists." Sihanouk has given the movement a legitimacy both inside and outside Cambodia it would not have otherwise had. The cynicism of the Khmer Communists' is only barely disguised.

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For his part, Sihanouk is painfully aware of his real position vis-a-vis the Khmer Communists. In the past few weeks, for example, Sihanouk stressed in Algiers and again in Peking, that he cannot engage in any negotiations without prior authorization from the Khmer Communists. He has also indicated that he wants the Chinese to pressure the latter into negotiations, and that he wants the US to facilitate his return to forestall an eventual Khmer Communist takeover in Cambodia. Sihanouk could hardly be more explicit about the game he would like to play. One might infer that his candor is made possible by a realization that the Khmer Communists have not labored under any illusions about what Sihanouk would like to do.

Sihanouk and the Insurgents

It is safe to say that Sihanouk can count on opposition from the ranks of the Khmer Communist Party to his playing any meaningful future role in Cambodia, but this does not mean that Sihanouk is without support within the Khmer insurgent movement. It should be kept in mind that the number of long-standing ideologically committed Khmer Communists is but a small fraction of the total number of military and political officers and cadre who run the insurgency's military and political apparatus. The political structure and

front organizations in the towns and rural districts under Communist control have drawn heavily on displaced bureaucrats of the old Sihanouk regime, schoolteachers, merchants, and Buddhist clergy. Most of these people are not outright Communists. Many of them have been recruited with the explicit understanding that the restoration of Sihanouk was the objective of the movement. Some of them continue to favor Sihanouk's return to power.

The insurgents' military structure also harbors real or potential Sihanouk supporters. The rank and file of the insurgent armed forces (this applies to the Cambodian Army as well) are peasants and it is the peasantry which is the backbone of Sihanouk's genuine support in Cambodia. How many of these peasant-soldiers are strong supporters of Sihanouk is hard to tell and impossible to quantify.

Similarly, it is not possible to tell how many insurgent military commanders and units owe their principal allegiance to Sihanouk. The reporting from the countryside is too episodic and fragmentary to allow responsible estimates of their numbers. It does indicate quite clearly that there are many insurgents who back Sihanouk but not the Communists. They have been given or have assumed the term Khmer Rumdoh (Khmer Liberation), a term that appears to signify a political tendency or function rather than an organizational entity. The Khmer Rumdoh phenomena appears to be present to some degree in all areas of Cambodia and in at least some instances it has been troublesome for the Communists. [redacted]

[redacted] reports a case in Kandal Province in which Khmer Insurgent Battalion 24--sporting Sihanouk pictures on their caps and uniforms--moved into a town last January, arrested and summarily shot the KCP Province Secretary whose anti-Sihanouk sentiments evidently were well known. No mere renegades, the battalion was acting under the orders of its commander. Similar reports of overt bloodletting between Khmer Rumdoh and Khmer Communists have been reported from elsewhere in Cambodia.

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Although troublesome to the Communists, there is little evidence to suggest that the Khmer Rumdoh or quiescent Sihanoukists in the insurgent apparatus will directly or seriously challenge the control of the Communist leaders. On the contrary, if the war drags on the chances are the pro-Sihanouk elements will gradually be weeded out or assimilated by the Khmer Communists. As indicated earlier, however, the Communists for now must still rely on Sihanouk's name in many sections of the country to promote the insurgency. This situation perhaps has been described

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"the people recognize Sihanouk as a leader and this is an important factor when planning on how to win their allegiance. The revolution must serve the people and many people do not know that Sihanouk was corrupt and a traitor. They will eventually be educated but for the time being their believing Sihanouk to be a real leader of the people must be taken into account. We have therefore decided that in order to liberate the country, Sihanouk must be used. Our revolutionary organization must therefore support him in order to gain the peoples' respect and to cast ourselves as true Cambodian patriots leading the revolutionary cause."

The Peasantry

Sihanouk has always been very popular in the countryside. He spent 20 years traveling to obscure and isolated villages, dispensing bolts of cloth to boeisant farmers, patting smiling children on the head, and paying homage at the village religious shrine in the company of proud monks. The key questions are how much of this support has waned since Sihanouk's ouster, and, how important is such support as remains. On the first,

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we can say that by the accounts of the Communists themselves, Sihanouk's name still sells in most-- but not all--of rural Cambodia. On the government side, some indirect evidence of residual pro-Sihanouk sentiment emerged in the June 1972 presidential election. In that contest, which was marked by some heavy-handed electioneering for Lon Nol by the army, a political nonentity who had no money and did little campaigning polled a remarkable 21 percent of the vote by doing nothing more than advocating Sihanouk's return to Cambodia as a "private citizen." We would place some credence in Sirik Matak's remark of some months ago that Sihanouk could easily beat Lon Nol in a free election. That may tell us more about Lon Nol and Sirik Matak than about Sihanouk, but still the Prince's standing in Cambodia cannot be ascertained without reference to the reputation and popularity of other potential leaders.

On the question of what Sihanouk's residual popularity means in practical terms, one can say that--at a minimum--we have not yet detected any groundswell of sentiment for the return of Sihanouk. In part, this is because of the predominately rural character of his support. In government-held areas, the peasants are neither sufficiently organized, aroused, or motivated to turn their inchoate feeling that things went better under Sihanouk (rice yes, war no), into positive action to bring him back. In Communist-held areas, the peasants are a more powerful force than they were three years ago. They have been armed, organized and politicized. But this same peasantry is also being led and manipulated by a Communist leadership opposed to Sihanouk's return to a position of real authority. Only the Khmer Rumdoh seem likely to give Sihanouk the support of their weapons in a potentially meaningful way.

In short, the peasantry could not prevent Sihanouk's ouster in 1970; they cannot bring him back to authority in 1973. Their importance would only become manifest if Sihanouk were already returned to

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Phnom Penh. This popularity in the countryside would be a factor in any contest for power that evolved between him and the Communists or the rightists.

The Buddhist Clergy, the Intelligentsia and the Bureaucracy

Except for the peasants, refugees in the cities, and possibly the urban working class, it seems unlikely that there are any socio-economic or political groups of any importance which enthusiastically support Sihanouk, or which would actively promote Sihanouk's return. There are probably some among the Buddhist clergy, the intelligentsia and the bureaucracy who are Sihanouk enthusiasts, but they are not many. But sentiment within these groups may be shifting toward accepting the idea of Sihanouk's return to power. This may be only negative support, i.e., these groups would not be dead set against the Prince's return. At the same time, it seems incapable that except for the occasional Sihanouk-hater, many among these groups, as among those in other walks of life, cannot help but draw an invidious comparison between conditions under Lon Nol and conditions before March 1970.

Unlike their co-religionists in South Vietnam, the Buddhist clergy in Cambodia has never been in the forefront of political affairs and its political views have always been muted. Before his ouster, Sihanouk was held in high regard by the Buddhists. He strongly upheld the region's precepts, was deferential to the leading monks, and saw to it that the clergy maintained a non-political role. It is reasonable to assume that today some Buddhist leaders deeply regret Sihanouk's alliance with the Communists and his reluctance to negotiate with the Phnom Penh regime. Buddhist leaders have long favored national reconciliation.

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The small Cambodian intelligentsia, journalists, educators, and university-level students in Phnom Penh, were among the regime's staunchest supporters in the first year of the war. Few among them supported Sihanouk; most thought his ouster would herald a more modern Cambodia, free of the backward-looking influence of the monarchy and traditional authoritarian ways. They have been bitterly disappointed by Lon Nol's own brand of authoritarianism, by his regime's corruption, and by its failure to produce a truly democratic form of government. Ironically, these were their chief criticisms of Sihanouk during his years in power. Lon Nol's failure to improve upon Sihanouk's record appears to have led to a gradual shift in at least the students' attitude toward the latter. Last February, leaders of the Khmer Student Association in Phnom Penh publicly stated that they could not countenance Sihanouk's return because he is a king at the head of a so-called "royal government." But by June the disenchantment of these same students had reached the point where they privately saw no alternative to talks with Sihanouk. Such views may not be in the majority among the intelligentsia, but they are probably growing and will continue to grow if it appears that Sihanouk is the key to bringing an end to the fighting and is the best chance of keeping Cambodia from complete Communist control.

The bureaucracy is another group in which there is no great enthusiasm for Sihanouk, although anti-Sihanouk sentiment is almost certainly less common within its ranks than within the intelligentsia. Self-interest is the most important determinant of how a bureaucrat feels about Sihanouk's return. At the higher levels, i.e., army, cabinet ministers, senior technicians, and provincial bigwigs, apprehension about the future is high. Many of them

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served Sihanouk in the past, and few would have intellectual or visceral qualms about serving him in the future. We have evidence that a key question is already being asked by the individuals: am I acceptable to the Prince? The answer will help determine how the particular individual stands on the Sihanouk question.

The instinct for survival is even greater among the lower and middle levels of Phnom Penh's civil service because--unlike many of their superiors--they lack the political and financial resources to improve their positions or to leave the country. The civil service has been particularly hard hit economically over the last three years, and its enthusiasm for Lon Nol's leadership has evaporated. Consequently, any prospect for change and improvement--even if that spelled Sihanouk--probably would not be unwelcome.

The Leaders in Phnom Penh

There is little or no overt or latent support for Sihanouk among the top military and political leaders in Phnom Penh. The men who deposed Sihanouk appear to be as hostile as ever to their former leader. Lon Nol, Sirik Matak, Cheng Heng and In Tam have been unflinching in their denunciations of Sihanouk, as he has been of them. There is an outside chance that In Tam or Cheng Heng could be persuaded to cooperate with Sihanouk in some future coalition government, if Sihanouk were agreeable, but Lon Nol and Sirik Matak would have to leave Cambodia. We have detected no expressions of support for Sihanouk among the government's military leaders. There have been numerous reports during the past year of disgruntlement at all levels of the officer corps with Lon Nol's leadership. At times, the grumbling has taken the form of coup threats uttered by a few particularly disaffected senior officers. Most of the coup "plotting" has dwelled on the need to get rid of Lon Nol, without tackling the question of a replacement. Sihanouk's

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name has never been raised in any of these cases as a possible alternative. (In his day, Sihanouk exercised firm control over the military and kept them out of national politics. He played one clique of officers off against another, and kept most of them content through the judicious use of promotions and other suitable "rewards.")

Most officers below the top level probably could make their peace with Sihanouk, provided that they had some reason to believe that they would not be subjected to reprisals at the hands of the Khmer Communists. Those that have been especially close to Lon Nol, however, would likely recognize that it would be better for them to leave Cambodia. Such hard-line Khmer Krom leaders like Generals Dien Del and Un Kauv probably would also decamp. Naturally, the degree of military support for Sihanouk among the officers would depend heavily on the circumstances of his return. The factionalized nature of the officer corps would probably preclude any effective organized military resistance to Sihanouk. By the same token, the officer corps' support for Sihanouk would probably be spotty. As for the troops themselves, they would probably follow their commanders, although some latent good will toward Sihanouk might surface.

Summing Up

Few Cambodians are able or willing to work actively for Sihanouk's return to a position of real power in Cambodia. Most, however, would find his restoration acceptable, even beneficial if it were seen as necessary for an end to the war and as a way of keeping Cambodia from falling to the Communists. Real hostility to Sihanouk seems to be confined to the top civilian and military leaders in Phnom Penh and to the Khmer Communist leadership.

Sihanouk is better known than any other Cambodian political figure. And for all his faults, he is perhaps the only leader with the experience and ability

to achieve some semblance of national reconciliation. Like Souvanna Phouma in Laos, Sihanouk may be in a position to straddle otherwise irreconcilable political tendencies. There may be doubts in Cambodia whether Sihanouk can perform such a function; there is little doubt that no other Cambodian leader presently on the scene has as good a fighting chance. Whatever other misgivings they might have, most Khmer know that--whatever are the circumstances of his return--Sihanouk will try to defend Cambodia's independence.