

REBIRTH OF THE CAMBODIAN NATION

*Accords signed in Paris in October might at long last
put an end to Cambodia's misery.*

BY GÉRARD HERVOUET

IN A BUDDHIST TEMPLE IN PHNOM PENH TWO PYTHONS WERE OBSERVED, a sign predicting that a king would return. Cambodia clings to symbols and, for the vast majority of Khmers, Prince Norodom Sihanouk embodies the glorious tradition of Angkor. The prophesy of the pythons was borne out by one of the first real consequences of the 23 October 1991 Paris Accords on Cambodia – the return of Prince Norodom Sihanouk to Phnom Penh.

At an extraordinary congress of the Revolutionary Party of the Cambodian People on 17 and 18 October 1991, the party of the current Prime Minister, Hun Sen, chose to reject its old Marxist-Leninist ideology and instead restore basic liberties. The right to free enterprise and a multi-party political system would henceforth be guaranteed. In this context, it is crucial to ask whether the alliance between Prince Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen will survive the planned election campaign, which has, to all intents and purposes, already begun.

The alliance probably will survive because the Khmer Rouge is still the common enemy of Hun Sen's regime in Phnom Penh, of Sihanouk's supporters, and of the third faction fighting for power headed by Son Sann. In its determination to thwart the Khmer Rouge and win the upcoming elections, whatever the cost, the Phnom Penh regime has even repudiated its fundamental ideological principles – a change that was met with approval from Prince Sihanouk who indicated his pleasure that Cambodia was "the first country in Indo-China to be decommunized."

THE HISTORY OF CAMBODIA'S CONFLICT IS TOO COMPLEX TO SUMMARIZE, but it is important to remember that in spring 1991, there seemed to be no real prospect of a settlement. After difficult negotiations, and under pressure from the five permanent members of the Security Council, a "framework agreement" was arrived at in late November 1990, which defined the fundamental principles on which a final settlement might be based.

The document established the composition and structure of a Supreme National Council (SNC) which has an equal number of representatives from each of the three resistance factions, with half its members (six) belonging to the current government. The framework agreement also establishes proposals for setting up the United Nations Provisional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), outlines its mandate, specifies the conditions for a ceasefire, for elections and the repatriation of refugees, and also lays down the principles of a new constitution.

Although unquestionably a positive achievement, the document left at least two problems unresolved: formal mention of the "genocide" committed by the Khmer Rouge after they came to power in 1975, and complex questions relating to the demobilization and disarmament of the forces in being on all sides. But in spite of the fact that a ceasefire has been observed by the four factions since May 1991, little prospect of further progress seemed likely until very recently. A meeting of the SNC in Jakarta in early June ended in failure, underlined by the Khmer Rouge's resistance to extending the ceasefire. One positive feature of the meeting was the evident willingness of Prince Sihanouk and Hun Sen to move the settlement process forward without the Khmer Rouge.

The SNC, at a meeting on 24 and 25 June at Pattaya, in south-east Thailand, concluded its work on a particularly positive note. Prince Sihanouk announced that the parties had agreed on an unconditional ceasefire effective 24 June, and that the opposition factions undertook to stop receiving arms from other countries. The SNC also announced its intention to set up its headquarters in Phnom Penh and to act as Cambodia's representative at the United Nations. Pending the arrival of the UN mission and the holding of general elections, the factions agreed to respect the status quo with regards to sections of Cambodia each controlled.

AN HISTORICALLY SYMBOLIC, BUT INFORMAL GATHERING OF THE SNC was held on 16 and 17 July, this time in Beijing. China made obvious its desire to influence the resolution of the Cambodian question, and in meeting Prime Minister Hun Sen for the first time, the Chinese authorities expressed their support for him and encouraged him to distance himself from the Vietnamese government. The SNC further accelerated the movement towards peace by announcing that it had unanimously chosen Prince Sihanouk as its President. The final communique from Beijing also indicated that the Prince had "decided henceforth to remain neutral and to act as a conciliator, not belonging to any one faction or political party."

Once again back in Pattaya in late August, SNC members reached agreement on the two important points left unresolved since 1990. With respect to "genocide," the government abandoned its basic requirement which guaranteed "against a return to the practices of the recent past." Even more importantly, the SNC accepted a French proposal advocating the demobilization of seventy percent of the armed forces of each faction, together with their weapons and equipment. And further, that the remaining thirty percent would be concentrated with their weapons, in cantonments under the supervision of the United Nations. The parties also agreed that once both bodies were set up in Phnom Penh, if no consensus could be reached on coordinating specific activities of the SNC and UNTAC, the final decision would be taken by Prince Sihanouk, as President.

PROSPECTS FOR ENDING THE CAMBODIAN WAR, AN INDIRECT RESULT OF East-West, Sino-Soviet and Sino-Vietnamese confrontations, have benefited from the recent shifts in international power, and basic changes in the course of contemporary history brought about by decomposition of the Soviet empire. The influence exerted by the permanent members of the Security Council has weighed heavily on the various protagonists unyielding positions. In any case, the Five's actions have had a positive influence on China which, in the wake of Tiananmen Square and the international turmoil following the Persian Gulf War, is sorely in need of a boost in credibility.

As a result of their continued support over the years for the Khmer Rouge, Chinese leaders had put themselves in a tight corner. During visits to Beijing over the past two years, a number of Chinese leaders