
Cambodia's Second Kingdom

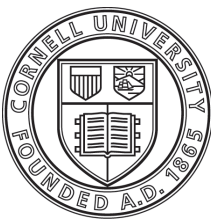
Nation, Imagination, and Democracy



Astrid Norén-Nilsson

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Cambodia's Second Kingdom



Cornell University

Astrid Norén-Nilsson

Cambodia's Second Kingdom:

Nation, Imagination, and Democracy

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by Sothy Eng, Ph.D

TO FRANCIS SISARIDH

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FOREWORD

It's an honor and a pleasure for me to introduce Astrid Norén-Nilsson's deft, clear-eyed, and persuasive study of contemporary Cambodian politics. Her novel approach is to examine the kingdom's political landscape via the ways in which competing political actors and the political groups they represent imagine the Cambodian nation. She also demonstrates how these actors, whom she has interviewed at length, legitimize themselves by privileging different segments of Cambodia's troubled past.

I admired *Cambodia's Second Kingdom* as a dissertation, but when I started to write this foreword I asked Ms. Norén-Nilsson to explain when and why she chose to focus the book as she did. She replied:

This book came about because of unbridled curiosity. It is the outcome of a genuine desire to understand the ideas and worldviews that circulate among Cambodian politicians today. The political reality in contemporary Cambodia is one of money politics, corruption, opportunism, and greed. But this is a familiar story attracting much worthy academic attention and it has been skillfully—and repeatedly—written down, and risks precluding a range of worthwhile research directions. The picture is bound to be incomplete, if we do not address the human beings who make up this system.

Instead of passing judgment on the Cambodian scene, in other words (although her sympathies with the hard-pressed Cambodian people are always very clear), Ms. Norén-Nilsson has courageously tried to comprehend and explicate that scene from the inside, largely in terms that political actors use themselves in a process that she calls “elite nationalist imaginings.”

The contemporary actors, factions, and parties dealt with in this book are all embedded in the past. In what follows, I'll try to position them inside a historical context, working backwards from the Paris Peace Accords of 1991.

In Paris, as potential signatories of the accords convened to resolve the Cambodian “problem,” four Cambodian political groups competed for attention. These included the Cambodian Peoples Party (CPP) that was governing the State of Cambodia (SOC) at the time and had done so under various names since 1979. Three other groups were arrayed militarily against it, operating from refugee camps in Thailand and from “liberated” enclaves inside Cambodia. These were a royalist faction known by its French acronym FUNCINPEC (United National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia), the non-royal Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP), and a hardline Communist faction, Democratic Kampuchea (DK), known colloquially as the Khmer Rouge.

Starved of local and international support, the DK faction dissolved in 1998, but the other three factions have survived in slightly different forms. The CPP remains in power in what is now the Kingdom of Cambodia. FUNCINPEC, although

weakened, still offers a royalist interpretation of the nation while opposition parties, calling for radical reform, are lineal descendants of the BLDP.

In 1991, the four factions had a history of despising one another. They had each governed Cambodia on their own at one stage. En route to holding or regaining power they offered their followers contrasting pedigrees, differing visions of the nation, and unique interpretations of the past. Ms. Norén-Nilsson examines these pedigrees, visions, and interpretations in detail in her absorbing book.

FUNCINPEC was founded in 1981, but drew its inspiration from the so-called Sihanouk era, which ran from 1955 to 1970. Norodom Sihanouk (1922–2012), a charismatic and controversial figure, was crowned King of Cambodia by the French in 1941. He abdicated the throne in 1955, soon after Cambodia gained its independence, because he wanted to become a full-time politician. He named his unambitious father, Norodom Suramarit, in his place. As prime minister, Sihanouk went on to shape and dominate Cambodian life. In 1960, when his father died, Sihanouk refused to name a successor and became chief of state. He was removed from office in a bloodless coup in 1970 and spent most of the next twenty years in exile.

In the 1980s and 1990s, FUNCINPEC never claimed that its intention was to return Sihanouk to the kind of power that he had enjoyed before 1970. Nonetheless, the prince's survival, combined with widespread nostalgia for the peaceful prosperous times that he embodied, gave FUNCINPEC an ideological head start in 1991 over the other contenders.

The BLDP, founded at the same time as FUNCINPEC, traced its pedigree to the anti-Sihanouk grouping that took shape in the late 1960s among Cambodia's small elite, and especially inside the National Assembly. Anti-Sihanouk feeling became widespread as the Vietnam War intensified and as Sihanouk seemed to many to be losing his grip. In March 1970, after the prince was overthrown, a pro-American regime, soon to be called the Khmer Republic (1970–75) came to power.

The *coupistes* hoped that a republican style of government would deliver commonsensical policies and that an alliance with the United States would keep Cambodia out of the Vietnam War. That they were tragically wrong on both counts did not mean that survivors of the Khmer Republic in 1991, choosing to follow the BLDP, had any enthusiasm for the Sihanouk era. Indeed, antipathy toward both Sihanouk and Vietnam were what held the quarrelsome leaders of the BLDP together.

Starting in about 1966, two antagonistic factions sprang up inside the small, concealed, and powerless Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). Hoping to come to power at some stage, the party secretary, Pol Pot (1925–98), and some of his colleagues were inspired by Maoist China and North Korea and wanted to dissociate Cambodia from communist Vietnam. Others in the party hoped to continue to accept Vietnamese patronage and advice, as the CPK and its predecessor parties had done ever since the First Indochina War (1946–54).

After the 1970 coup, the Khmer Rouge entered an uneasy alliance with North Vietnam in order to defeat the Khmer Republic and ostensibly to return Prince Sihanouk to power. Over the next two years, North Vietnamese forces, in the course of severely weakening those of the Khmer Republic, provided the Khmer Rouge with arms, training and logistical support. By the end of 1972, the Khmer Rouge had become an effective fighting force. The Khmer Republic's army, plagued by

corruption, heavy casualties, and poor leadership, mounted no further offensives and three-quarters of Cambodian territory was in Khmer Rouge hands.

In 1973, North Vietnam withdrew its forces from Cambodia as part of a far-reaching cease-fire agreement with the United States that affected all of Indo-China. Pol Pot and his colleagues interpreted the Vietnamese action as a betrayal. They began to purge anyone whom they suspected of sympathy with Vietnam. The purges intensified after the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. Over the next three years, tens of thousands of suspects, especially in the eastern part of the country, were hunted down and put to death. Thousands of others sought refuge in Vietnam. One of the refugees was a DK regimental commander named Hun Sen (1952–), who became prime minister of Cambodia in 1985. He has dominated Cambodian politics ever since.

In January 1979, a Vietnamese invasion ousted the CPK, and in one of history's perennial somersaults, the invaders placed a handful of pro-Vietnamese Cambodians, including Hun Sen, in command of the newly established Peoples Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Over the next ten years, at least 100,000 Vietnamese troops, sustaining heavy casualties, prevented the Khmer Rouge from regaining power. When these troops withdrew in 1989, the PRK changed its name to the State of Cambodia (SOC), instituted some popular reforms, and abandoned Marxism–Leninism as its governing ideology. The moves had little effect on Cambodian politics. Opposition to the CPP remained out of the question, and everyone in the ruling party—hundreds of whose members, like Hun Sen, were former Khmer Rouge—remained in place.

In Paris two years later, the foreign sponsors of the accords were anxious to remove Cambodia from the Cold War that they had inflicted on the country. They urged the four factions to disarm, to disregard the past and to compete in United Nations-sponsored national elections. Those foreign negotiators sidestepped the importance of past events—especially the brutality of the defunct DK regime—and overlooked the fact that Cambodian politics had always been a brutally contested zero-sum game. Throughout Cambodian history, winners have been expected to take all and losers have been expected to collapse, change sides, or disappear. The four factions were now being asked to abandon the game and to become friends, for a while at least.

It's worth recalling that when three of the factions identified in Paris had governed Cambodia—the anti-Sihanoukists as the Khmer Republic, the Khmer Rouge as DK, and the pro-Vietnamese faction of the Khmer Rouge as the PRK/SOC—their leaders, on coming to power, took pains to condemn their predecessors to death. It's not surprising in this context that the people charged with drafting a definitive Khmer-language text of the accords had great difficulty in finding a Cambodian word that translated as “consensus.”

The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC, 1991–93), set in motion by the accords, was the UN's most expensive operation to date. It was heavily criticized at the time. With hindsight, I think it was a partial success. To its credit, UNTAC freed up Cambodian print media, sponsored multi-party national elections (boycotted by the DK faction), prioritized human rights, allowed Sihanouk to be re-crowned as a constitutional monarch, and repatriated over 300,000 Cambodians from refugee camps in Thailand. UNTAC also opened up Cambodia to extensive foreign assistance and investment.

Unfortunately, UNTAC failed to disarm the Khmer Rouge and failed to disarm and disempower the CPP, which remained in day-to-day control of the country throughout the UNTAC period. After FUNCINPEC won the UNTAC-sponsored elections in 1993, the CPP refused to accept the results and insisted on co-governing with the royalist party in an acrimonious, ill-fitting coalition. Soon afterwards, UNTAC ended its mandate and its participants went home.

Over the next two decades—the period dealt with in what follows—outside powers, international institutions, and over two hundred NGOs donated years of their time and tens of billions of dollars to Cambodia. The country's infrastructure slowly improved, tourism boomed, the civil war came to an end, foreign investment increased and a thriving industrial sector dominated by foreign-owned garment factories was established in the outskirts of Phnom Penh.

Alongside these positive developments, and claiming credit for them, the CPP remained firmly in power. Hun Sen, relishing the name “strong man,” brushed aside efforts by outsiders and opposition parties to open up and improve Cambodian governance. In 1997, a brutal CPP-led *coup de force* tightened the CPP's grip and eliminated FUNCINPEC as a political force.

By then, many donors, advisors and analysts had become impatient, pointing to the CPP's stranglehold on politics, as well as to Cambodia's corrosive patronage arrangements, widening inequity, culture of impunity, and endemic corruption. To a large extent, these conditions characterize the Cambodian scene today.

Some encouraging signs came to the surface in 2013–14, after national elections in which the CPP unexpectedly suffered some bruising losses. Ms. Norén-Nilsson discusses these developments in a perceptive epilogue. On balance, however, the political landscape of Cambodia in 2015 is almost as bleak as ever.

It's against this distressing historical background that *Cambodia's Second Kingdom* seeks explanations for the ideologies behind competing factions in Cambodian politics today.

In her years of engagement with Cambodia, Ms. Norén-Nilsson has absorbed many harsh readings and assessments of Cambodian politics without losing her affection and respect for the Cambodian people. As she gained fluency in spoken and written Khmer, she also gained the confidence and good will of dozens of talkative sources, including the most prominent Cambodian politicians—Hun Sen, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, and Sam Rainsy—who spoke with her at length. To my knowledge, no other scholars of Cambodian politics have assembled their findings in this innovative and rewarding fashion.

Nonetheless, formulating the orientation of the book caused her some methodological problems for a time. As she has written:

Though my intellectual ambition was clear in my mind, in pursuing the topic I had to steer through serious problems of vocabulary and concepts. The first challenge was to identify the categories of analysis: “ideology” did not take me very far, nor did “nationalism”... I came to realize that the most fruitful perspective was that of political imaginations revolving around the nation, but that these had to be approached in a broad, historically informed sense—capable of identifying national imaginations where they might otherwise not be detected, and of deciphering them by situating them in their histories of meaning.

In this passage Ms. Norén-Nilsson describes the direction, rewards, and complexity of her book *from the inside*. In a similar fashion, the book examines Cambodian politics by working outward from informants and from what is on the minds of these men and women. In doing so, Ms. Norén-Nilsson has come up with a fresh, clear-headed interpretation of Cambodian politics that might surprise some “experts” but would be recognizable to Cambodian practitioners.

Most of Ms. Norén-Nilsson’s informants seem to have been unaware of the large, complex, and often moralistic literature in foreign languages that has sprung up over the years about the Cambodian political scene. Similarly, the authors of these studies, with a few notable exceptions, don’t seem to have spent much time listening to the people whose actions and policies they often overconfidently describe.

This pathbreaking, enjoyable book remains faithful to Ms. Norén-Nilsson’s research agenda, and is also notable for its scholarly reach and sophistication. In the course of writing it, Ms. Norén-Nilsson has responded directly or indirectly to a wide range of materials in English, French, and Khmer that deal with Cambodia’s history and politics. She has also read and commented on theoretical materials concerned with nationalism, political imaginings and political thought. She pays sustained attention, for example, to *Imagined Communities*, the iconic work by Benedict Anderson,¹ and challenges Anderson’s occasionally Olympian findings when they fail to fit with her own.

Cambodia’s Second Kingdom is an impressive and pleasing scholarly work that opens up new vistas for anyone interested in the ways that Cambodia works or fails to work. It may also be of interest to people concerned with the imaginings that we call on to explain or criticize our own nation, or justify our political stance.

Finally, because this volume is so accessibly written, I found it a joy to read.

David Chandler

Melbourne, Australia

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

PREFACE

How do different Cambodian political projects interpret the political identity of the nation? How do competing national imaginings play out in contemporary Cambodian politics? In today's Cambodia, marked by power politics, widespread corruption, and opportunism, these questions seem a little off the mark. Scholarly silence on these issues suggests a tacit shared understanding that they are dwarfed, or made outright irrelevant, by the crudeness of the political game. Yet, in ignoring them, our understanding of contemporary political practice is fragmentary and incomplete. This book seeks to show the ways in which, in resurrecting Cambodia from the ashes and the void left by civil war, the idea of the nation has been intrinsically bound up with political competition and outcomes. It outlines how national imaginings have been entwined with competition for electoral victory within the reinstated multi-party democratic framework. By extension, this book suggests ways in which attention to national imaginings can be useful for understanding political developments in a post-conflict setting.

In 1991, more than two decades of Cambodian civil war came to a close when four contending factions signed the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA).¹ Out of these four factions, the political parties that would come to dominate Cambodian politics in the resulting multi-party democratic system emerged. The last phase of the prolonged civil war had split Cambodia into what can be thought of as two contending nations: one under the control of the Phnom Penh-based government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK, 1979–89), and one—itself internally fractured—under the control of the tripartite coalition resistance government, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK).² These were divided geopolitically, in that each enjoyed the backing of contending Cold War power blocs; physically, by a border of landmines; as well as in their imaginations, maintaining (sets of) disparate historiographies and future visions with both sides claiming to represent the genuine Khmer nation. On the brink of a new era in which the keywords were peace, national reconciliation, and multi-party democracy, the imperative of “Khmer unity” emerged as paramount, whilst, with no secure conceptualization of the Cambodian nation, the outlines and character of the national community were unclear.³

¹ The “Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict” were signed in Paris on October 23, 1991, at the final meeting of the Paris Conference on Cambodia.

² The coalition comprised the Party of Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge), the anti-communist Kampuchean People's National Liberation Front, and the royalist Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique et Coopératif (FUNCINPEC, National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia).

³ Caroline Hughes, “Reconstructing Legitimate Political Authority through Elections?” in *Beyond Democracy in Cambodia: Political Reconstruction in a Post-Conflict Society*, ed. Joakim Øjendal and Mona Lilja (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009), 47–48.

Two decades on, two contending nations again stand pitted against each other. In the national elections of 2013, the vote emerged almost equal between the long-ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the united, self-identified democratic opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). Representing sharply different visions and interpretations of Cambodia, these two parties have split the electorate in two. Baffled observers, who in this polarized duel see a first credible challenge to the CPP's seemingly monolithic hold on power, search for ways of approaching current goings-on. To make sense of these, we need to look beyond the idea of a post-conflict nation, and instead turn to examine what disparate histories are being created and what contrasting visions for the future are expressed. Although these questions are of key importance, their significance from a political perspective has yet to be adequately explored. Political science scholarship has produced a solid corpus of analyses of how power politics has played out in post-PPA Cambodia. We now have the beginnings of an understanding of the workings of formal and informal institutions in relation to political party competition. Yet, a systematic analysis of how political competition is, and has been, anchored in more fundamental debates over the character of the national community has been missing.

This is a book that unearths these debates, charting them and their workings from optimism in the wake of the PPA through to the stirring present. It explores the ways in which political party actors in the multi-party democratic system in the Kingdom of Cambodia (KOC, 1993–), the state instituted following the PPA, have advanced different articulations of the nation. It proposes that, to make the new democratic politics mean something in post-PPA Cambodia, all political party actors turned to the nation as the most important part of the answer. Following the agreements, which were intended to unite the competing nations, the imperative of nation-building loomed larger than ever. Yet the main political parties continued to advance radically different imaginings of the national community.

In this sense, they continued to advance competing nations, whilst each laid claims that their version, alone, represented the true Cambodia. Referring to the political dimensions of art, Ashley Thompson has suggested that there is a crisis of representation in today's Cambodia, where the wartime destruction of art raises the question of what form the modern nation will take.⁴ This book brings to light a crisis over the representation of the contemporary Cambodian nation that has similarly permeated political party competition, albeit in a manner largely hidden from outside observers.

The 1991 PPA and the resulting 1993 multi-party elections constituted but the latest turning point in Cambodian modern history, marked by discontinuity. Cambodia has gone through six successive post-independence regimes since 1953, each of which attempted to realize widely different political systems. With the reintroduction of a multi-party democratic system, the factions-turned-parties redefined their political projects to compete within the new framework. They did so by rearticulating, brushing up, and patching up ideas of the political contents of the nation, and their own role in representing, embodying, or defending it. This entailed renegotiating the character and contours of the nation and its people, and the role

⁴ Ashley Thompson, "Angkor Revisited: The State of Statuary," in *What's the Use of Art: Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, ed. Jan Mrázek and Morgan Pitelka (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 202–3.

and mandate of national political leadership. Principal notions of the new political setting, such as democracy, royalism, and populism, were articulated as part of the same process. Among these notions, that of democracy was key, since, within the nominally democratic framework, it provided a language in which all imaginings were partly phrased.

Now that a profound divide has once again surfaced, this book seeks to reorient our understanding of political competition in today's Cambodia by proposing that competing national imaginings have formed a powerful underlying dynamic structuring it. The main political party actors in the KOC all vocally advanced different claims to represent the nation. They did so in ways that encompassed the symbolic and discursive contestation of the political contents of the nation. They sought to forge links between themselves and the nation, advancing claims that they were uniquely poised to realize the nation's aspirations. These competing bids for representation of the nation are central to understanding the trajectories of different political party actors, and for the making of key political notions in post-PPA Cambodia, and therefore are inseparable from larger contemporary political developments. Finally, political legitimacy in the KOC was no exception to the string of successive Cambodian post-independence regimes, which all firmly tied legitimacy to representation of the political community of the nation. This book traces the crucial, critical, surprising, extraordinary, curious, ill-fated, thwarted, futile, and, occasionally, dull ways in which different bids for legitimacy are ultimately tied to different ideas of the nation.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

HUN SEN

Hun Sen was born Hun Bunall in 1952 (in Peam Kohsna village, Steung Trang district, Kompong Cham province) to farmer parents. He was sent at the age of thirteen to continue schooling in Phnom Penh at Indradevi high school, boarding at Neaga Vorn pagoda as a pagoda boy. Although he desired to be a teacher when he grew up, Cambodia's political developments would get in the way. He joined the maquis and, as a Khmer Rouge soldier, known first as Hun Samrach and then as Hun Sen, he quickly rose in ranks. Wounded in battle, he lost his left eye one day before the April 17, 1975, fall of Phnom Penh. In January 1976, he was married to Bun Rany, a nurse, in a Khmer Rouge-organized ceremony alongside twelve other couples. (Hun Sen and Bun Rany would have six children.) He escaped to Vietnam in 1977, only to return to Cambodia after Vietnamese troops, aided by the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation, of which he was a founding member, overthrew the Khmer Rouge-regime on January 7, 1979. At the age of twenty-seven, he became foreign minister for the resulting People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and in 1985, at the age of thirty-three, the world's youngest premier. After the multi-party elections of 1993, he was made second prime minister for the Cambodian People's Party and, since 1998, he has held the position of prime minister. Currently the longest-serving premier in Asia, he has announced his intention to remain in power until age seventy-four.

NORODOM RANARIDDH

Born in 1944 to Norodom Sihanouk and Phat Kanhol, a royal ballet dancer, Ranariddh left for France in 1958 to attend school in Marseille. He studied public law at the University of Provence, eventually obtaining a PhD degree, in 1974. That was after spending a brief interlude in Cambodia, to which he had returned just before the establishment of the Khmer Republic (which imprisoned him for six months). He built a career as an academic: he was a research fellow at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and became an associate professor at the University of Provence. In 1983, Ranariddh left to join the royalist resistance movement Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique et Coopératif (FUNCINPEC, National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia). He became commander-in-chief of its army, the Armée Nationale Sihanoukiste (ANS) in 1986, FUNCINPEC secretary general in 1989, and FUNCINPEC president in 1992. After the 1993 elections, in which FUNCINPEC emerged victorious, a power-sharing formula was put in place that made Ranariddh first prime minister. In July 1997, he was violently overthrown by second prime minister Hun Sen, a defeat from which Ranariddh never recovered. Under Ranariddh, FUNCINPEC became a government coalition partner to the CPP in 1998 and 2003. In 2006 he was ousted from the FUNCINPEC presidency, and

spent the following decade making occasional political comebacks as leader of minor royalist parties, including the eponymous Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP). He was reinstalled as the FUNCINPEC president in 2015, reportedly at the suggestion of Hun Sen.

SAM RAINSY

The son of prominent politician Sam Sary and In Em, Sam Rainsy (literally “ray of light”) was born in 1949 and named after la Ville Lumière—the city of Paris. His childhood was marked by his father’s falling out with Sihanouk, an event that led Sary to flee Cambodia in 1959 to join the Khmer Serei. (Sary died in 1962, and it is likely that he was assassinated.) In 1965, Sihanouk exiled the remainder of Sary’s family, and Rainsy grew up in Paris. Here he courted his wife-to-be, Tioulong Saumura, daughter of Sihanouk loyalist Nhiek Tioulong, and they married in 1971. He earned degrees in political science and economics, and a master of business administration at INSEAD’s (Institut européen d’administration des affaires) Paris campus, and he and Saumura successfully pursued careers in finance. Rainsy joined the newly formed FUNCINPEC in 1981, and, upon returning to Cambodia in 1992, was made minister of finance in the 1993 government. While in office he railed against corruption, and was expelled after seventeen months. He founded the Khmer Nation Party in 1995, which changed its name to the Sam Rainsy Party in 1998. In 1997, during a political rally led by Rainsy, a grenade attack killed at least sixteen of his supporters. Twice he has gone into self-imposed exile in France to avoid prison, and returned by royal pardon (once over a charge of defamation, 2005–06, and another time for charges of racial incitement and destruction of property, 2009–13—charges that he claims were all politically motivated). When the SRP merged with the Human Rights Party into the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in 2012, Rainsy assumed the party presidency. Returning to Phnom Penh in July 2013, just nine days before national elections in which the CNRP’s strong showing was the best electoral performance by any party of Rainsy’s, he was greeted by huge crowds of supporters.

KEM SOKHA

Born in Takeo province in 1953, Kem Sokha studied law at Phnom Penh’s Royal University of Law and Economics, and left for Prague in 1981, where he earned a master of science degree in biochemistry. Returning to Cambodia in 1986, he applied his studies to the distillery sector. He became secretary general of the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP, 1992–95), secretary general of the Son Sann Party (1995–98), and deputy secretary general of FUNCINPEC (1999–2002). In parallel, he made a name for himself as a human rights activist. In 1991, he created the human rights NGO Human Rights Vigilance of Cambodia. In 2002, he left FUNCINPEC, which he criticized for its lack of independence vis-à-vis the government, and set up the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), a nationwide network that organized commune-level public forums and human rights training. He was briefly imprisoned in 2005 on defamation charges after a Human Rights Day celebration, but released upon pressure from the international community. In 2007, he left the CCHR to set up the Human Rights Party (HRP), which won three out of 123 contested seats in the 2008 elections. Over the next

mandate period, the HRP saw a surge in popularity, and made a strong showing in the 2012 commune elections. In July 2012, the SRP and HRP merged into the CNRP ahead of the 2013 elections, and Kem Sokha became the party's deputy president.

CHAPTER ONE

CAMBODIA'S SECOND KINGDOM: STARTING POINTS

Nationalism, in different guises, runs like a red thread through modern Cambodian history. In a country that has served as the testing ground for a string of sharply contrasting political systems, this amounts to a rare, striking continuity. The nationalism of various historical agents can be understood as their minimum common denominator. In today's Cambodia, even at a casual glance, references to the nation, *cheat*, abound. Visual imagery, first and foremost that which depicts the iconic temple of Angkor Wat, reproduces the idea of national belonging with incessant insistence. The most casual conversation quickly drifts to deliberate ideas of national identity with different degrees of passion. Expressions of nationalism appear everywhere you turn, but there is no agreed-upon understanding of how to make sense of it in the Cambodian context.

CAMBODIA AS AN UNFINISHED IMAGINED COMMUNITY

To account for the omnipresent idea of “nation” in Cambodia, it makes sense to turn to one of the most influential books on nationalism of our times. Conceptualizing the nation as an “imagined community,” Benedict Anderson rewrote the research agenda for the study of nationalism. In *Imagined Communities*, he traced the origins of national consciousness to the modern industrial age of Western European Enlightenment, when economic change sparked the rise of scientific discoveries, rapid communication, capitalism, and print-as-commodity.¹ Print capitalism helped create and disseminate national languages across territories previously lacking a shared identity. It also spread the idea of “homogeneous, empty time” by creating a sense of the simultaneous activities of different persons within the same imagined community, bestowing a sense of shared “calendrical” time.² In this way, economic factors helped spread universal, “horizontal-secular” notions of national space and time, which enabled diverse groups of people to relate to each other as parts of a national community.³ The resulting nation was an imagined community, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in minds of each lives the image of their communion.”⁴ Anderson emphasized the role of creative imagery, invented traditions and symbols of tradition in the construction of modern nations.

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 36.

² *Ibid.*, 22–36.

³ *Ibid.*, 37–46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.