



CAMBODIA

Political Profile

The great 9th-15th Century Angkor Empire once governed most of Southeast Asia, but it later came under the alternating rule of neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam.

Cambodia was a protectorate of France from 1863 to 1953, when King Norodom Sihanouk declared independence. Sihanouk, who abdicated in 1955 to run for prime minister, was overthrown in a right-wing 1970 coup that signalled the start of civil war.

The Khmer Rouge guerrilla movement defeated the U.S.-backed Lon Nol republic in April 1975 and launched a rule of almost four years that left more than one million people dead from execution, disease, malnutrition, starvation and overwork in work camps.

Vietnamese troops invaded in late 1978 and installed a socialist government made up mostly of former Khmer Rouge members who had broken with their leader Pol Pot.

Backed by Vietnam and the Soviet Union, the Phnom Penh government was shunned by the West and China and battled a three-party guerrilla coalition, nominally led by Sihanouk but spearheaded by the Khmer Rouge.

Vietnam withdrew its troops in September 1989 and the rival Cambodian factions signed a U.N.-brokered peace pact in 1991, which culminated two years later in general elections and restoration of the monarchy with Sihanouk on the throne.

A coalition was formed, led by the royalist FUNCINPEC party, which won 58 of 120 National Assembly seats and the formerly ruling communist Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which won 51 seats, but tension flared in 1996 over power-sharing.

At least 16 people were killed in March 1997 when grenades were thrown into a rally led by government critic and former finance minister, Sam Rainsy. On July 5, 1997 Hun Sen's forces moved against Ranariddh's men in Phnom Penh, sparking two days of fighting and Ranariddh's ouster. Ranariddh, who had left Cambodia the day before Hun Sen seized power, was in March 1998 convicted in absentia at two trials and sentenced to prison terms on security-related charges. Ranariddh denied the charges. Under a Japanese-sponsored peace formula he was pardoned by his father and allowed to return and campaign in the general election, scheduled for July 26.

In the elections Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party won just over 41 percent of the votes, but failed to win the two thirds majority needed to form a government. The main opposition parties rejected the results, alleging widespread fraud and CPP intimidation. After weeks of street protests, opposition leaders finally agree to convene the new parliament and begin talks on a coalition with the CPP.

The Khmer Rouge, which began to fracture in August 1996 when top cadre Ieng Sary split from the group, suffered a further blow in March 1997 when many remaining troops mutinied, seizing their headquarters at Anlong Veng. Khmer Rouge chief Pol Pot, purged in July 1997, died near the Thai border on April 15 1998.

Two of the three remaining senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge surrendered late in December 1998 and the last of the rebel fighters formally joined the Cambodian army on February 9 1999.

*Sources: Reuters 2002, Encyclopaedia Britannica 2002;
Chandler P- Brother Number One*