

Vestiges of the French Protectorate in Modern Day Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper investigates the extent to which the 90 years of the French Protectorate (1863 to 1953) left influences on Cambodia today - despite the many and radical political interruptions since Cambodia became independent. It will seek to explain why some fragments of the French legacy continue to influence Cambodia and why some have faded or disappeared. It will also ask the question 'What do Cambodians today think about the 90 year French Protectorate and believe is its lingering importance ?'

Methodology

Most of this research was field based conducted by interviewing key people at UNESCO, The Royal University of Phnom Penh (most importantly Professor Henri Locard who is an internationally acclaimed expert on Cambodian history), Madame Labic, honorary lawyer and senior legal advisor to the National Bank of Cambodia, Madame Froschel of Lyceé Français René Descartes, Phnom Penh, Dr Juliet Uy of CamEd and Cambodians who remember the second end of the French Protectorate. A complete literature search has also been conducted.

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Background

The French protectorate of Cambodia followed a period of war between the Thais and the Annamites (early term for Vietnamese). In 1831 to 1834 the Thais fought on Cambodian soil against the Annamites and again from 1841 to 1845. Both wars were inconclusive and exhausted the combatants who returned to their countries..

King Ang Duong was released from Bangkok to rule Cambodia, a buffer state between Thailand and Vietnam. The Thais kept his sons in Bangkok and his royal regalia to maintain their suzerainty over Cambodia. During his rule (1845 to 1860) he was open to foreign visitors, the most prominent of which was Henri Mouhot, whose publication of 'Travels in central parts of Indochina Siam, Cambodia and Laos during the years 1858, 1859 and 1860' (Mouhot, 1864) excited the French public with notions of a lost or forgotten but 'irresistibly romantic city of Angkor' (Tully, 2006,).

King Norodom (son of King Ang Duong) signed the Protectorate with Naval officers from the French forces from Saigon in 1863 and this was ratified in Paris in 1864. King Norodom was housed in a French built palace in the new capital of Phnom Penh. It was important to raise his status if the French were to use him to confer legitimacy on their rule. It still exists and has been augmented by further French buildings. These vestiges remain in the Cambodia of 2018.

A rebellion from 1884 to 1886 was suppressed by the French and mercenary troops and it effectively ended the Protectorate as a new treaty was forced on King Norodom established direct French rule in 1884 (although the title 'Protectorate' was kept as it projected a better image). The next 3 kings (Sisowath, Monivong and Sihanouk) were chosen by the French.

The last of these, King Sihanouk, was chosen in 1941 by the new Vichy (pro-Hitler) Governor-General, Jean Decoux. Vichy France was headed by Marshal Petain. Within the Axis powers there was initially a consensus allowing Vichy France to administer Cambodia. This broke down in March 1944 when the Japanese expelled the French in order to establish an eastern empire ruled by an eastern power (Japan). They were cruel. Cambodians preferred French rule and, even more strongly, independence. The Second World War ended in the East in August 1944 with the 2 atomic bombs one on each of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

The Petain Youth was modelled on the Hitler Youth. It was started by Jean Decoux. This was copied by the Sangkum Reas Niyum after the end of the the Protectorate by Prince Sihanouk by setting up a youth corps with exactly the same activities, purposes but with loyalty to Sihanouk. This remnant ended in 1970 following the transition from constitutional monarchy to Lon Nol's military dictatorship

The constitution of Cambodia

The kings of Cambodia have changed intermittently between the Sisowath and Norodom branches of the royal families. The concept of choosing kings was started by the French. They chose 3 kings (Sisowath, Monivong and Sihanouk) and formally ended the system of primogeniture (a system which requires the oldest son of a king to succeed him as king). Today it is a council of state who chooses the kings (eg King Sihamoni). 'elected by a council of state'.

In 1946 an election was called to decide on Cambodia's constitution. Prince Yuthévong's Democrat party won by a landslide and they proposed the Constitutional Monarchy democratic model. It involved a ceremonial Head of State (the King) and a directly elected National Assembly. This constitution was re-introduced by UNTAC (United Nations transitional authority of Cambodia) because they saw King Sihanouk as a uniting and stabilising figure – connecting the past with the present. The uni-cameral National Assembly became bi-cameral in 1999 when a second chamber, the Senate, was introduced. The role of the King today remains the same as it was in 1947.

There has been a long history of autocratic power in Cambodia. King Sihanouk developed an early sensitivity to criticism. Professor Henri Locard said in an interview that : "The constitutional monarchy was *de facto* abolished by Sihanouk in 1955 when he restored the absolute monarchy for himself"(Locard, 2018).

UNTAC ran a successful and fair election in 1993. Only 3 elections in Cambodia could be said to be democratic in the modern sense : 1946, 1947 and 1993. Only a few people were educated before the departure of the French and they left no middle class or lasting independent institutions such as ; an independent judiciary, free press, or any electoral or governing experience.

Political developments from the Protectorate

The appearance of nationalism in the Protectorate and its effect on modern Cambodia

The development of political parties started in 1946 in the Protectorate. The Democrats won the 1946 election with 73% of the vote and the Liberals (supported by King Sihanouk and the French) lost. The death of Prince Yuthavong, leader of the Democrats, from tuberculosis 1947 was a severe blow to the Democrat Party's future. The lack of experience in government and only an elite in control was the result of French negligence. Some did go to France for educational reasons. Saloth Sar was a peasant who had female relatives in King Monivong's harem (King Monivong was obsessed with sex). He never passed any exams in France.

Only one high school, Sisowath High School was built before independence. Some Pali Schools existed in the Pagodas teaching children about Buddha. Pali is an ancient Brahmin script closely related to the ancient Indo-Aryan Vedic and Sanskrit canonical languages (in the West, students who learn Ancient Greek are following the western idea of going back to the origins of their western civilisation). The Pali schools performed the same purpose for the study of eastern civilisation. They also taught French after 1906. The Nagarra Vatta and Khmer Krok newspapers provided some outlet for feelings in the 1930s but they were cautious (mainly blaming the Vietnamese). Immigrant Vietnamese 'led to ethnic friction' (Tully, 2006) causing problems and unrest. Both papers were closed down under Jean Decoux under Vichy rule of Cambodia (1940 to March 1945).

The graduates of Sisowath High School used to meet regularly to discuss politics at the Buddhist Institute. However, by censoring the free press in the Vichy period (1941 to 1945) the French snuffed out an essential pillar of a modern democracy which has implications for Cambodia today. By contrast, the Times of India (still a world class newspaper) took on Indian journalists in the 1920s who were surprised that the newspaper criticised the British administration of India. They were learning that a purpose of a free press is to keep politicians honest. By independence in 1948 India had a free press, a well trained Indian civil service, a legal system of highly educated Indian judges and above all, a functioning parliament with democratic processes in place by the year of independence. India also had 53,000km of railway to Cambodia's 500km and only one line (Phnom Penh to Battambang). Cambodia was a dim shadow of its Indian counterpart at the same period when both were becoming independent.

In 1993 19 political parties contested the election but only two parties : Funcinpec led by Prince Rannaridh, son of King Sihanouk, (leader since 1992) won 45% of the vote and the Cambodian People's Party (led since 1987 by Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padey Techo **Hun Sen**). Funcinpec secured 45.7% of the vote and the CPP 38.28%.

After discussion King Sihanouk he decided to make Prince Rannaridh the first Prime Minister and Mr Hun Sen the second prime minister. Whilst the election was free and

fair the King let the Cambodian people down by not standing by the democratic process which should have put Funcipec into power led by Prince Rannaridh. In one single blow Sihanouk destroyed the principle of “The government and his Majesty’s loyal opposition”. These are the words used in Westminster, London – the oldest continuous democracy in the world (developed over 800 years).

King Sihanouk was an absolute monarch until he left Cambodia in 1970. Henri Locard rejects the orthodoxy among historians by saying that ‘there was no evidence that the Lon Nol administration in 1970 was backed financially by the Americans or was a coup de’etat’ (Locard 19/3/2018). There are historians who would disagree with this, notably David Chandler and John Tully.

In fact Sihanouk took the constitution under his arm (metaphorically) and flew to Moscow and Beijing and 5 years later he enabled the Khmer Rouge to slip into power, returning to be their head of state - the titular head of a murderous regime. Two years later prince Sihamoni was recalled to Phnom Penh from the North Korean ballet company. Sihanouk was demoted from King to comrade and kept in house arrest together with his family at the royal palace. They grew vegetables in the palace garden to survive. He was interviewed in exile in France in the 1980s by a US TV company. The American interviewer said ‘your critics would saythat you would sleep with the devil to achieve you end “ (ABC TV, 1987) and said ‘well, as King I had to accept the government presented to me’. King Sihanouk *chose* to return to Cambodia and he agreed to be the façade of the Khmer Rouge government. He knew what he was doing.

Legal systems left by the French

In conversations with Genevive Hussenot Labic (senior advisor for the legal service at the National Bank of Cambodia) (Labic, 2018) it was clear that the French Napoleonic code (based on Roman Law) has remained largely intact in the Cambodian *criminal* law system and is a remnant of the French Protectorate. Like Japan after the Meiji Restoration, Cambodia after 1993, looked round the world for the best legal systems to adapt to local conditions. The Commercial law was much influenced by the Canadian system (which in itself is derived from English law as it is a Commonwealth country).

The civil code and labour laws have come largely from Australia (another Commonwealth country influenced by English law). The problem is that at the end of every code are the Khmer words which translate into English as ‘All that is contrary to this law is cancelled’ (Labic, 2018). She went on to say the ‘translations into Khmer Language were done by people without legal training and therefore Cambodian law is not based on specific legal concepts (such as the principle of the presumption of innocence).’ (Labic, 2018). The concepts that Labic believes are now prevalent : nationalism, patriotism and chauvinism. These concepts, she believes, reinforce racism in court decisions.

It is impossible to overstate the effect of corruption on impoverished Cambodian people just ‘liberated’ from the Vietnamese.

‘The laws contain a mixture of nationalism and chauvinism and are full of loopholes’ (Labic, 2018). The civil code came mostly from Japan. Because court records today are difficult to access today it is difficult to make comparisons with other countries for consistency. Some French Aid was supplied in the 1990s to provide help in standardising the practice of law. UNDP provided expert assistance in the 1990s to judges who had no training or law degrees and had gained nothing from the Vietnamese occupation (1979 to 2001).

Two French notaries came to Cambodia to try to re-instate the role of a Notary Public. This was woefully inadequate. Fifty French notaries spread around the country training local lawyers were needed. Only five Cambodian notaries public were established and they have a monopoly of policy.

Common law is increasing in Cambodia (Labic, 2016). This is a break with the Napoleonic Code of Protectorate times. The benefit is that records of trials are now being recorded so that judges can see what happened in other similar cases.

Polygamy was allowed by the Protectorate but was abolished after 1953. Except for King Sihanouk, of course. He had 6 wives and several concubines. Thousands of others continued the practice of polygamy and out-of-marriage sex, having been permitted by the Protectorate. It continues today.

Most importantly, the Protectorate brought in communes between 1866 and 1890. At the time they were known as ‘quartiers’ by the French and “villages” by Cambodians. This type of local administration with its limited legal powers is one that continues today (with interruptions from the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese occupation). It replaced the role of head men (senior villagers with no actual legal power). The districts have grown and the population increased so the boundaries had to be changed accordingly but communes remain today as important subsections of provinces.

In 1925 there was a serious disruption to the execution of French law and how it was seen by Cambodians. It was called the Felix Bardez affair. Felix Bardez was an efficient tax collector in Prey Veng. He was moved to Kompong Chhnang – where the French were getting very little revenue. Bardez was extremely heavy handed, arrogant and would not accept that the local people could not pay immediately. He did not allow payments in stages.. He was so aggressive that the locals killed him. ‘The assassination of résident Bardez was the first overtly political murder of a French official for many years’ (Tully, 2006). The trial of the villagers in Phnom Penh showed how French law could be skewed in favour of French nationals and Cambodians. The prosecutor held all the documents (mainly confessions obtained under torture) and the Defence was not given sight of of any papers or given any legal help. The result was that Cambodians saw how unfair French law could be. Negative memories of this helped the beginning of the nationalist stirrings and ignited a political consciousness well before the end of the Protectorate. The unfair application of law continued after 1953. This was one of the negative remnants which was not resolved even after 1993. For example, the issue of land title and a national register of land ownership blocks economic development.

However the establishment of formal courts of law was the silver lining of the cloud of the Felix Bardez affair. A publicly codified legal system taught in the University of

The French language

“Noompang” is the romanisation of the French word for bread. Many other words of French origin were left in Cambodia. Other examples include changed forms French words such as : resident, poste, chauffeur, complet, anglais, burang. Because of the paucity of French financed schools the remnants of the French language were few. Also, the Khmer Rouge killed all those they found using French using various tricks to get rid of French speakers.

Anecdotally, some Cambodian professors think that the loss of the final ‘s’ in trying to learn English come from the French habit. For example, the word “prices” is often pronounced as //pri:// because the French word for price ‘prix’ is pronounced like this . ‘Esprit de corps” is an example of a borrowed expression and, as you can see, the written form has a final ‘s’ but the pronunciation does not (Dr Juliet Uy, 2018)

The 22,000 foreigners descended on Cambodia in 1992 with an average pay of \$10,000/month. Most Cambodians were surviving on a \$1 a day. A conclusion was drawn that **English** was the language of power. There was an ‘English school street’ on a road between the Palace and Norodom street with wooden benches and blackboard and teachers of variable skills and pay rates. The French tried to keep their language as a lasting reminder of the protectorate (for educated people at least) and to make Cambodia a truly Francophonie country. They failed in this. There began a tussle between French aid to the faculty of medicine, dentistry and the Institute of Technology and the condition that aid money from the French government was tied to the curricula being taught in the French Language. Some students circumvented this by having evening lessons in English and Khmer. A full scale protest erupted in the first decade of the 21st century against the compulsory use of the French language in many subjects in tertiary education.

In 2003, French was dropped as the official second language of Cambodia. The purpose of French aid is no longer about the language but is more cultural (Seguin, 2008)

French was officially dropped as Cambodia’s second language in 2003. Medical and other students protested about having to learn French to study at the Institute of Technology, Dentistry and for internships at Calmette hospital. Many Cambodians today learn Chinese as a second language. Although English remains the top choice for young Cambodian learners

Attitudes to foreigners

This is worth mentioning because the antipathy to the Vietnamese has derived from centuries of fear towards its stronger neighbours (never more so from 1975 to 1991). Cambodian kings had unrealistically high hopes that the French Protectorate would restore the Mekong Delta (Kampuchea Krom) to Cambodia. The Protectorate's main interest was Vietnam where the business was greatest and it was by the most populous of the three areas of the French Indochina (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). This would prove useful in the First World War when many Vietnamese ended up in the trenches fighting France. Also the island of Koh Tral is directly opposite to the Cambodia coast but was given by the French to the Vietnamese and it has been re-named Phu Quoc.

Attitudes to the Thais are still negative in Cambodia because the Thais still claim a temple in Preah Vihear which the United Nations rule in the 1960s as Cambodian territory. The French had secured Battambang, Siem Riep and Preah Vihear as Cambodian provinces. However, for domestic political reasons, the Thais make political trouble around this temple eg moving the military to the border.

Laos has aroused little concern in the Cambodian populace's minds. However the Chinese building a dam across the world's last undamed great river ; the Mekong. This will cause trouble for Cambodia in the future.

There is prejudice against people (local or dark coloured skin). This is a class issue. Dark skin is regarded as showing you having worked in the fields or in open air jobs of low status. Unfortunately Africans face discrimination in Cambodia. Ironically the French and white people are regarded highly and often marry locals . The anti-semitic norm of Europe in 1900 (with the Dreyfuss affair). Tully makes much of this in the Vichy administration of Cambodia's anti-semitism - but that did not leave traces in Modern day Cambodia.

Architecture from the Protectorate which still remains today (2018)

The most visible and obvious vestiges of the French era are the buildings that have survived until today. The notion of 'heritage' buildings started in 2007 was good but it still has no legal status (Delanghe, 2018). Consequently many beautiful buildings from the French era have fallen down, have been demolished and for some only have the facades have been left (the rooms have been destroyed and the interior changed). The ravages of the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese occupation left negative effects on Cambodian buildings.

Huyn de Verneville (the *résident Supérieur* of Cambodia in 1889) was responsible for the town planning of wide boulevards (Monivong, Norodom and Sihanouk streets) which still exist today. He renovated Wat Phnom by surrounding it with lush gardens. You can still see the tramlines he laid at the north west perimeter of Wat Phnom. Originally the boulevard from the railway station to the river was a canal (part of a semi-circular waterway around the city both endings with the river Sap) but this was filled in and made into gardens. Above all, the French left the concept of town planning as well as specific buildings such as the central market.

The French 'built for permanence, improved sanitation and generally developed the capital' (Igout, 1993). Some of the main buildings which have survived today would include : The Treasury, The Post Office, the Library (Bibliothèque), The Railway Station and Phnom Penh barracks (now changed in use) are also still in existence. The Central Police station is now vacant and crumbling (it was used in the Hollywood film, *City of Ghosts*). The former Town hall residence remains (since used by airlines as their office – and currently being renovated for some other purpose). Some hospitals (eg Preah Ang Duong), the colonial port authority building, the Ministry of Justice, the French Chamber of Commerce (crumbling and full of squatters) survive today. The UNESCO building and the buildings to the left as you look at the UNESCO building with your back to the National Museum there are fine French era building which are now crumbling and used as police living quarters. The National Museum itself is an important vestige of the Protectorate. Many buildings on the north side of street 240 show the French era Chinese shophouses. On the south side of street only the current residence of the British Ambassador is a French era building, which has beautifully restored. Only 6 church buildings remain today and are not used for religious purposes. There are also fine French era buildings all over Cambodia. The French market in Siem Riep is a good example of chinese shop houses built before 1953 and maintained in good condition.

Buildings we have lost for ever include : the Phnom Penh French prison with its turrets and main building (called 'T3'). It is now a car park. The Customs and Excise building has been replaced by a hotel complex. The *Résidence Supérieure* was knocked down to build the UNTAC buildings in grey concrete (just across from Wat Phnom Penh – to the north west). It is now used as the offices of the Council for the Cambodian Development authority. The Roman Catholic cathedral was destroyed by the Khmer

Rouge because Karl Marx had said that religion is the 'opiate of the masses' in the book 'On religion' (Marx, 1850). Marx believed that religions give illusory happiness to individuals and constitute another way of keeping the masses poor and oppressed.

The Treasury bridge over the canal was destroyed when the canal was filled in.. The Verneville bridge was an enormous building near to the railway station and traversed the canal. It was knocked down when the canal was filled in. The health services office became a Thai restaurant and has disappeared. The French sporting club is now the land the American embassy is built on. Many many other beautiful buildings have sadly been demolished

What are some of the reasons for these demolitions ? Rith Henglay (now aged 78) said that Cambodians don't care about what the French built. They prefer modernity to 'recent' buildings (eg the Vattanac tower is a modern icon for Cambodians). By 'recent' Henglay explained that he meant anything after 1953. Another explanation is that the land was bought by rich people who had obtained their money dishonestly and are laundering their ill-gotten gains by destroying old buildings and constructing new ones. Every demolished building from the Protectorate era has its own story – and it would be difficult to account for them all here.

However Cambodia still has many French buildings left and are even constructing buildings in the old style. At the top of the Boulevard between the Raffles Hotel and the National University of Management stands a building in 'reproduction' French style. This implies that some Cambodians do appreciate the Protectorate architectural style.

"Chinese shophouses were built and they followed King Norodom's policy of modernising his Capital and constructing solid houses with brick walls and tiled roofs" (Igneau, 1993). Many of these shophouses remain in Phnom Penh and elsewhere. The style is similar to those found in Singapore, Penang, Hanoi and Bangkok. On the street side the ground floor is extended by means of an awning or a covered passageway with arcades : it was the 'five foot way' of towns colonised by the British.

Many street names changed after the Protectorate but street signs still use the French 'rue' (meaning street). The Pasteur street in Phnom Penh continues. There are also Pasteur streets in Saigon, Hanoi and Vientiane (all formerly in French Indochina).

The balance sheet of empire : what remains ?

On the positive side the following survived the end of the French protectorate of Cambodia in some form : new ideas of administration (eg communes), technology eg (railways, the building of railways and roads, electricity in the major towns, water supply and its purification), town planning (eg wide boulevards in Phnom Penh), the construction of a high school (Sisowath) and new agricultural ideas which would include the development of rubber plantations. There are remnants of French architecture all over Cambodia (including the royal palace). The notion of choosing the next monarch from a wide variety of princes started in 1904 with King Sisowath and continues today. A single free and fair election in 1946 was the role model for UNTACs 1993 general election. The peaceful transition from Protectorate to independence should not be underestimated (think of the Vietnamese struggle which the French which cost over 10,000 lives at the battle of Dien Bien Phu). Some French food has remained (eg baguettes), slavery was abolished, paper money was introduced and continued after the Protectorate as a means of exchange, a free market capitalist system was bequeathed to an independent Cambodia and some legal and tax ideas were laid down.

The French began the rubber plantations. The extension of these which will lead to colossal damage in the 21st century – the cutting down nearly all of all of Cambodia's rain forests to make way for cash crops. It's the millenials who will suffer from the climate change resulting from the destruction of the world's rainforests. Of course we cannot blame the French Protectorate for starting climate change (it would have happened anyway) but it a vestige of French commerce and rule (as it was for the British in Burma).

What didn't survive?

Many French buildings of great beauty were destroyed or hollowed out leaving a shell filled with modernity. The French started planting rubber plantations but made products from the rubber (eg car wheels) outside Cambodia. Today (2018) Cambodia has very few multinational global manufacturers (multinationals) which are making things for the worldwide economy (Cambodian beer, for example, is not exported). British American Tobacco is a multinational which makes local brands (eg Ara, Kent, Alain Delon) in Cambodia but exports dried tobacco leaves for export to make foreign brands outside Cambodia. Why do they not make, roll and package their international brands in Cambodia (eg Dunhill, Lucky Strike) ? The reason maybe the limitation on foreigners owning land and the existence of corruption. Battambang oranges are said to be the best yet in Lucky supermarket you can only buy Australian or Thai orange juice in cartons. Browns cafes are proof that Cambodians can start businesses. However, corruption and doubt as to who owns the land have to be resolved if we are to see big Cambodian companies

Huge amounts of money is pouring into Phnom Penh (particularly from China, Vietnam and Korea) and this is changing the French landscape (particularly in Phnom Penh). A lot of it is in apartment and office buildings. However some Cambodian companies are starting up (eg Brown's café). Cambodia receives around US\$600 million in foreign aid every year and investment from China, Korea. Aid following decolonisation is not unique to Cambodia but the effectiveness of aid is controversial and it can encourage a dependency culture. The USA gave Cambodia \$400 million from the day of its independence to 1963. The Chinese supplied \$22 million to Cambodia in equipment in 1956. In the end, spoon feeding only teaches you the shape of the spoon.

Much of the Napoleonic law did not survive and a mixture of foreign and local ideas prevail. There are numerous inconsistencies in Cambodian law which need to be rectified by the legislature.

Tourism in the protectorate was a few thousand. Angkor Wat now attracts over 4 million visitors a year. The French archeologists restored many temples in the National Park of Angkor Wat. Now the monuments are under pressure from too many tourists and damage to the temples results. Not all visitors to Angkor Wat treat this priceless treasure with respect. Will the government set a limit of the number of tourists visiting Angkor Wat ? Probably not.

The French language is spoken by fewer than 5% of the population (compared to its dominance in Protectorate days). The emphasis of French aid in 2018 is not connected to the language (Seguin, March 2018). There is a French Institute in Phnom Penh and cultural events and French films are shown regularly (but subtitled in English). Cambodia is a member of the Francophonie (the French equivalent to the British Commonwealth) however it has only developing countries apart from France and its meetings are unimportant to Cambodia. Aid directly from France is important to

Cambodia The Commonwealth has many developed countries in its membership (eg Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand, Canada) and is genuinely a group of mutually supporting English speaking countries.

Conclusion

The early the 90 years of French rule in Cambodia (1963 to 1953) gave Cambodia access to Western of technology, administrative practices, production and distribution techniques and many other new ideas were implemented. Because of the severity of regimes like the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese invasion it is amazing that there are any vestiges of the Protectorate at all (post 1953). However some ideas of the Protectorate were brought back, some continued and some of these were successful (eg the 1993 free and fair election) and some not (eg re-introducing the French language).

Countries who were not colonised (eg Thailand) are proud of that fact. To some extent they missed out on the globalisation that colonialism by democratic states bring. King Chulalongkorn travelled extensively and brought back many ideas from the West, which resulted in its superb railway systems. He did not, however, bring back the idea of a democratic constitutional monarchy and decided what was good or bad. And wasn't a technical expert. Thailand has changed so many times from military to civilian rule so much that stability is a real problem. Cambodian's respect and love King Sihamoni. However today's Cambodia has avoided the cult propaganda which prevailed during the time of the Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Moreover, it is obvious that the Thai king's son is not a good fit for the job.

The idea of the French protectorate of choosing the best prince available for the role of king has served it well. Even though the King has no political power he must be a respected person related to the two branches of intertwined royal families (Norodom and Sisowath). This process is not influenced by foreigners (unlike Poland which once had elected kings heavily interfered with by the Russians). Cambodia has emerged as a proud independent country - and the 90 year Protectorate allowed that to happen. Without Cambodia would have been carved up by Vietnam and Thailand.

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ABC TV interview June 1987

Translation of interview with Rithy Hengly born in 1940

1. What do you remember about the French Protectorate ?
I remember some Japanese soldiers came to our house but I don't remember when
2. What do you think still remains from the French time ?
The French Central Market and French bread (baguettes)
3. Where you born ?
Kandal
4. Do you speak French ?
A little but not many speak French today
5. What else do you remember ?
I remember seeing King Sihanouk in 1952. He visited the countryside
6. Is Cambodia better today than when you were a boy /
Oh yes. Phnom Penh is much bigger and there many shops and jobs

