

DIPLOMATIC RUPTURES

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Pnompenh, Indochina

The government of Pnompenh has suddenly decided to break diplomatic relations with that of Bangkok. This gesture concludes a long quarrel which had scarcely broken out during the period of the French protectorate of Cambodia.

Siam, now Thailand, used to consider Cambodia a vassal state, and for a long time all the diplomatic latitude that was allowed the Kings of Cambodia by their two powerful neighbors, the Emperor of Annam and the King of Siam, was the privilege of acknowledging themselves, in turn, as protégés of the one in order to fight the other.

When the French arrived in Cambodia, Prince Norodom was closely supervised by an ambassador from the Court of Bangkok. The latter even tried to oppose the crowning of the Prince, since the crown of Cambodia was held, in effect, as security by the Siamese Court, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that the royal jewels could be recovered before the coronation.

Since then, Cambodian-Thai relations have been marked by an extreme Cambodian sensitivity to anything to do with Bangkok's continual claim to "rights" in one or another part of the Cambodian kingdom.

The governments of Pnompenh are understandably sensitive. It will be remembered that Thailand, profiting from the French defeat in 1940, invaded Cambodian territories with the unconditional support of Japan. Its military success was not great; its fleet was destroyed by the Cambodian navy in the battle of Koh Chang, and the full strength of the Japanese was finally necessary to force Cambodian and French troops to acknowledge their relative weakness. Thailand took advantage of the situation to annex two Cambodian provinces, which were recovered only in 1946.

The last six months have seen alternate periods of calm and tension between the two countries. Various territorial problems are in a state of uncertainty, and the most important is the problem of the temple of Preah Vihear. This temple is located in the Dangrek mountain range, on the frontier. According to the protocols of the agreement arranged in 1907 between France and Siam, the frontier follows the line

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of the watershed and, therefore, Preah Vihear is incontestably on Thai land. But the textual agreement has little meaning, because the documents attached to it, and particularly the map drawn by the Franco-Siamese mission, indicate that Preah Vihear has always been considered Cambodian.

From this point on, confusion reigns, not only because there are other claims besides this one, but because the Thais are likely to cite whatever authority suits their advantages, whether it is the evidence of diplomatic documents or the opinion of a team of experts engaged to study the spot. In the meantime, Bangkok has sent soldiers to occupy the contested temple, thereby marking its intention not to yield this territory.

This was the situation at the time of the fall of the government of Sim Var, and very little hope remained of seeing the situation improve. All the progressives in Cambodia sought to exaggerate the least frontier incident, and several times slips occurred which would have delighted a disciple of Freud. They say that one day a telegram with these words, "8:30, comma, Thai plane violates Cambodian air space," was read, "8 o'clock, comma, 30 Thai planes . . ."

Whether this anecdote is true or false, it illustrates perfectly the point of exasperation to which, half through Thai provocations, half through a collective hysteria, the Cambodians had been driven. As in the case of South Vietnam, all the difficulties proceeded, according to the progressive intelligentsia, from the fact that Thailand was a member of SEATO and Cambodia was neutral.

The advent to power of Prince Norodom Sihanouk seemed to bring a considerable improvement. Before the formation of his government, Sihanouk announced his intention of going to Bangkok and Saigon to negotiate with Thai and Vietnamese government leaders, and to establish neighborly relations among the three capitals.

Nothing came of the negotiations with Saigon. An offensive article in the very official Vietnam press made the visit impossible, and the flying trip of Ngo Dinh Nhu to Pnompenh two months later was not effective enough to clear up the matter.

In the case of Thailand, it seems that, for a time at least, the normalization of diplomatic relations was well under way. The visit of Prince Sihanouk took place, negotiations were begun, a Cambodian exhibition was organized in Bangkok, and the press of the two countries immediately reflected the reigning euphoria. It did not last.

The negotiations conducted by Son Sann, Cambodian Minister of Foreign Affairs, were a fiasco. Thailand refused to admit the most minor Cam-

bodian propositions, and it was on this occasion that one saw the Bangkok government refer for one problem to a map, for another to a text, for a third to an arbitration, and so forth, according to which attitude best served its interests. It was impossible even to agree on a *modus operandi* for the conference, and to top it all off, Bangkok rejected even the idea of appealing to an international tribunal, such as the World Court at the Hague. This intransigence could surprise only those who were unaware of the juridical weakness of the Thai position. An American diplomat remarked to me at the time that one does not go before a judge willingly when one is sure of losing.

Matters appeared to be hopelessly blocked, yet the affair did not seem to be coming to a head. The anti-Cambodian riots which marked the failure of the negotiations were not a success for those who staged them. It is even said that, urged on by a fraction of the police which was not very well informed, the rioters confused their embassies and damaged the one of a country friendly to Thailand.

Pnompenh pretended not to take this seriously. The newspapers continued to bombard each other with Homeric epithets, but in these countries that rarely does harm to anyone.

The rupture of diplomatic relations, then, came as a total surprise to everyone. The news broke in the capital of Cambodia while the biggest festival of the year, "the festival of the retreat of the waters," was going on. It was the Australian radio which first gave the alarm, then the news was transmitted by Saigon. Diplomats as well as journalists were caught unawares.

Two days later, the Cambodian government suspended tourist visas between Thailand and Cambodia. But this measure was explained as a means of combatting both diverse trafficking—in drugs and currencies—and clandestine immigration. It therefore appeared to be a police, rather than a political, measure. What is most surprising about the affair is the rapidity with which Cambodian-Thai relations worsened. Only a week before, anyone at Pnompenh would have stated in good faith that it was on the South Vietnam front that the most storms were piling up.

On the following day, some news items illuminated the decision of the Cambodian government. From the rumors that were circulated and then from the official information given out, it appeared that what caused the Pnompenh government to break diplomatic ties so suddenly was the tone of the violent press campaign. The Thai press, according to circles close to the government, is again claiming the provinces of Siemreap and Battambang which, for Cambodia, is intolerable. These are, indeed, the very provinces which, with Japan's support, Thailand had

annexed during the last war and which she regretfully returned only after the defeat of her protector. These same government spokesmen added that other reasons worked for Cambodia's decision to cease normal relations with Thailand, namely, the movements of Thai troops coming to reinforce frontier posts and the harrassing of Cambodians in Thailand who were loyal to the Cambodian government.

And one must not forget that Thailand harbors Prince Sihanouk's bitterest enemy, the rebel chief Son Ngoc Thanh, and his remaining followers. The complicity that Son Ngoc Thanh has always been able to enjoy in Thailand is a matter of public notoriety. But he was only following the tradition of numerous pirate chiefs who have their homes on one side of the frontier and operate in relative security on the other side. What is most distasteful in the case of Son Ngoc Thanh is that, a prisoner of the French during the Indo-chinese war, he was liberated through the personal intervention of Prince Sihanouk.

On his return to this country, he hastened to oppose the man to whom he owed his freedom. He allied himself with the Communist Vietminh; then, once the war in Indochina was over, he offered his services to the United States. The letter in which he offered his services was referred to Prince Sihanouk by the American ambassador.

Trouble caused on Cambodian territory by Son Ngoc Thanh seems unthinkable. Nevertheless, it is always possible to complicate the life of a government. Also, since Thailand has started renewing its territorial claims, Son Ngoc Thanh's presence on Thai territory gives no comfort to the Cambodians.

If one assembles all this evidence, the gesture of the Pnompenh government becomes clear. It seems, however, that its precipitation was due to the initiative of Prince Sihanouk, and that there was not time to warn the government about the decision. If we can believe the bulletin of the official Cambodian Press Agency, on the day before the rupture, the ministers had had a perfectly serious discussion of agricultural development.

At first sight, the matter is amusing. But if one remembers that the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sonn San, is at the UN where he represents his country, it then appears normal enough for the head of government to assume his responsibilities alone.

Further, the presence of Sonn San at the UN suggests that the severed relations between Pnompenh and Bangkok could be restored within the international organization. It is rather ironic to think that one of the greatest uses of the United Nations, created by some who had a horror of anything which resembled secret diplomacy, is to permit just such discreet encounters between statesmen who cannot receive each other officially, and who find there the means of discussing the very problems which divide their countries.