

Norodom Sihamoni

Norodom Sihamoni (centre, with hands together), 2008. **Norodom Sihamoni** (born May 14, 1953, Phnom Penh, Cambodia) is the king of Cambodia who succeeded his father, King Norodom Sihanouk, in October 2004 after Sihanouk abdicated the throne.

Sihamoni was the elder of Sihanouk's two sons with his last queen, Monineath. At the time of Sihamoni's birth, Cambodia was becoming independent of France (which until then had maintained a protectorate over Cambodia). However, the new country was in the middle of a protracted period of warfare and unrest in the region (the Indochina wars), and Sihamoni spent much of his life outside the country.

From an early age Sihamoni showed an aptitude for the arts. He went to study in Czechoslovakia when he was 9, and at age 14 he starred in *The Little Prince*, a film made by his father. After Sihanouk was deposed from power in a 1970 coup, Sihamoni remained in Prague (now in the Czech Republic), where he attended the National Conservatory and the Academy of Music Arts, concentrating on dance, music, and theatre. In 1975 he joined his father in North Korea and began film school there. He followed his parents and returned to Cambodia during the totalitarian Khmer Rouge regime (1975–79) of Pol Pot, and after 1976 he resided with his parents under house arrest in the palace at Phnom Penh. Several of Sihamoni's half-brothers and half-sisters, living elsewhere in the country, died during that period.

After the fall of Pol Pot, the family was evacuated to China, where Sihamoni served as his father's secretary for two years. In 1981 he moved to Paris, where he became a professor of classical dance and formed his own dance troupe, called Ballet Deva. He choreographed some of the troupe's performances and also made two films with a dance focus. In 1992 he was named permanent representative of Cambodia to the United Nations. In 1993, the year his father was recrowned king, Sihamoni became Cambodia's permanent representative to UNESCO, a position he held until 2004.

Sihamoni's selection as king over one of his higher-profile siblings or uncles probably represented Sihanouk's desire that someone neutral and politically

untainted succeed him. Although Sihamoni reportedly was initially reluctant to become king, he accepted the role of monarch after a unanimous vote of approval by Cambodia's nine-member Throne Council. Concerns that Sihamoni might find it hard to live up to the reputation of his charismatic and politically savvy father were dispelled when, early in his reign, he showed himself to be a dignified king, humble toward his office and eager to reach out to the Cambodian population. In addition to formal trips abroad, Sihamoni made a series of visits to rural Cambodian villages and towns, where he met and talked with local residents. He also made known his desire to improve education and health care in Cambodia and to help revive the cultural life of the country.

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