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Sihanouk's recently announced willingness to lead a united Kampuchean resistance front, including Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK), was accompanied by some thorny preconditions. If these problems are overcome, Sihanouk could provide a major psychological boost to the resistance on both the international and domestic scene. Any progress, however, is likely to be slow at best.

His Preconditions

Sihanouk asked China and the DK to agree to:

- Abandon the name "Democratic Kampuchea" and return to the use of "Cambodia." In a later interview Sihanouk also demanded that the DK vacate its UN seat in favor of the new front.
- Provide military and financial support for the non-Communist segment of the front comparable to that given to the DK.
- Disarm all united front forces after the ouster of the Vietnamese and then have Kampuchea policed "for several years" by a UN-guaranteed international supervisory force.

Initial Reactions

China, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the DK have publicly welcomed Sihanouk's announcement but are bothered by some of his preconditions. In particular, they will be reluctant to change the name of the front, fearing that this could result in an empty Kampuchean seat at the UN or cause the DK to lose its seat to the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime. Beijing and the DK also will resist making promises about disarmament and UN supervision, preferring

not to address this in specific terms now lest it sap the DK's morale and distract attention from the need to increase pressure on Vietnam. The question of aid should not be a problem; China would probably agree to such assistance, although it would want to draw the West, especially the United States and Japan, into the process to ensure maximum international recognition.

China, Thailand, and the DK may have additional reservations. To varying degrees, they view Sihanouk as an unpredictable ally and wonder whether his announcement is designed merely to complicate and retard negotiations to create a united front between the DK and former Cambodian Prime Minister Son Sann, leader of the non-Communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). Finally, Sihanouk's continued verbal attacks on the

DK's repressiveness--even while offering to cooperate--are not conducive to future unity.

ASEAN states have not collectively responded to Sihanouk's announcement but will meet in June to discuss it. Thailand only half-heartedly welcomed the development, while Indonesian and Philippine officials stated that ASEAN would probably accept Sihanouk's political leadership--but only as a figurehead. Alone of the ASEAN countries, Singapore directly requested the West and Japan to publicly welcome Sihanouk's reemergence as the Kampuchean leader.

Vietnam predictably condemned Sihanouk's announcement as proof that he is a Chinese lackey and that Beijing has failed to make the DK a significant resistance force. Hanoi realizes, however, Sihanouk's potential for improving the stature of the proposed front. Phnom Penh has already formulated its response, branding Sihanouk an opportunistic pseudopatriot who had once worked with the genocidal DK and now wants to do so again to further his own ambitions.

Sihanouk's About-Face

Sihanouk previously insisted he would never cooperate with the DK because of its brutality. Developments suggesting that Son Sann might soon agree to cooperate with the DK in a broader anti-Vietnamese front, however, probably persuaded Sihanouk that he could no longer

remain aloof and allow Son Sann to take the lead. Sihanouk may also be playing for time; he has stated privately that he "is in no hurry" to strike a deal.

His preconditions are aimed at resolving the dilemma posed by Pol Pot's DK forces, who are anathema to the Kampuchean majority and yet provide the only military resistance to the Vietnamese presence in Kampuchea. Given his own previous identification with Pol Pot and his subsequent abuse by the DK, Sihanouk is clearly averse to joining that government once more. His proposal that resistance forces be disarmed after a Vietnamese withdrawal--however impractical--is also an effort to offer the Kampuchean people hope that there would be no resumption of Pol Pot's brutal policies.

Prospects

In any case, the process of forming the new front, with or without Sihanouk, will be lengthy and unpredictable. For starters Sihanouk will meet with Khieu Samphan in Pyongyang at the end of February and apparently intends to ask Son Sann to participate.

If an agreement is reached, Sihanouk almost certainly would attract support from the Kampuchean people--even including some DK rank and file--and this could help foster unity. Perhaps more important, as a respected international figure he would add to the front's legitimacy among Third World and Western countries. On the other hand, he is likely to retain his hostility toward the DK and his competitive relationship with Son Sann.