

Reconstituting the Divided Sangha

Buddhist Authority in Post-Conflict Cambodia

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11.1 INTRODUCTION

The Cambodian Constitution was the product of an internationalized peace process that saw the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) supervise a short-lived nationwide ceasefire, assume responsibility for state administration, and facilitate the election of a Constituent Assembly. The subsequent promulgation of the Constitution was meant to introduce a triple transition: from war to peace, from Marx to market, and from dictatorship to democracy. The 1993 Constitution also returned Cambodia to a system of constitutional monarchy, largely based on that which had been overthrown in a military-led coup d'état of 1970. The Constitution also reaffirmed the status of Buddhism as the state religion (a status which had already been reintroduced by constitutional reforms in 1989). Beyond this, Cambodia's new constitutional document also recognized a transition that had already taken place within Cambodia's Buddhist institutions: namely, the move from what had been a unified sangha to one in which authority was again divided between two major monastic sects, the Mahanikay and the Thammayut. Alongside several other articles that clearly related to Buddhism – the Article 4 reintroduction of the national motto, “Nation Religion King,” the Article 43 assertion that “Buddhism shall be the religion of the State,” and the Article 68 provision of a mandate for the state to “help promote and develop Pāli schools and Buddhist institutes” – another article, Article 13, had major implications for the religion it was ostensibly discussing, relating to the rarefied issue of how to structure the “Council of the Throne.” The article specified that, upon the death of one king, a new king should be declared within seven days by a council that included the Supreme Patriarchs (*sanghareach*¹) of the

¹ *Sanghareach* (Khmer) is, like *Sangharaja*, literally translated as “Sangha King.” The title Supreme Patriarch will be used herein.

Mahanikay and of the Thammayut, along with seven other members (all elected to offices in the civilian government).²

Although the present version differs slightly in its composition, the Council of the Throne established in 1993 can effectively be understood as a reincarnation of an institution that had been formalized in Cambodia's first formal constitution, initially the product of a joint Franco–Khmer Commission while Cambodia was still under French colonial rule, and eventually promulgated in 1947. In both instances, the Constitution provided for an elected monarchy of sorts, with the mechanism of royal succession being placed primarily under the control of the government rather than the royal family, albeit initially at the behest of King Norodom Sihanouk (Jennar 1995, 35). This chapter traces the contours of Buddhist authority in Cambodia since 1947, as that authority changed, disappeared, and reemerged. It also links these changes to Cambodia's changing constitutional orders in those years. It argues that the bifurcation of Buddhist authority recognized in the current Constitution is the result of historical and political contingencies that continue to affect the interaction of Buddhism and public law in Cambodia. This account begins from a recognition that while the inclusion of the two Supreme Patriarchs on the reconstituted Council of the Throne was a predictable outcome of the constitution-making process of 1993, it was in fact only possible because of a wholesale restructuring of the architecture of sangha authority that had been initiated less than two years earlier. The presence of *two* Supreme Patriarchs, representing separately the Mahanikay and Thammayut sects, was made possible by the fact that Cambodia's Buddhist authorities had themselves effectively been reconstituted and divided into two over the course of 1991 and 1992, shortly after the negotiation of the Paris Peace Accords, which in turn formed the basis of Cambodia's 1993 Constitution.

While the distinctions between Mahanikay and Thammayut sects are relatively slight in doctrinal terms, the division between the two is both politically and symbolically significant, as this chapter will explain. The arrival of the Thammayut sect in the mid-nineteenth century was historically controversial precisely because it introduced divisions in religious authority between a traditional Mahanikay sect, which remained broadly popular, and a newer lineage that had been imported from Siam and was almost exclusively associated with urban elites and aristocracy. These divisions remained latent throughout the colonial and immediate post-independence eras, and only threatened to surface after the fall of the monarchy in 1970. After the tragedies of the Democratic Kampuchea period, in which the Khmer Rouge entirely deconstructed and destroyed Cambodia's religious institutions, the country's Buddhist sangha reemerged slowly, in a hobbled and

² Art. 14 states that: 'The King of Cambodia shall be a member of the Royal family, be at least 30 years old and descend from the bloodline of King Ang Duong, King Norodom or King Sisowath.' The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia 1993, Art. 14. The other seven members of the Throne Council include the President and first and second Vice Presidents of both the Senate and the National Assembly, and the Prime Minister.

homogenized form. During the 1980s, the sangha's membership was tightly restricted, and its structures unified and centralized under the auspices of the historically more prominent Mahanikay sect. Only after the reinstatement of Buddhism as the state religion in 1989, and the return of King Norodom Sihanouk during the negotiation of the Paris Accords, was the Thammayut sect reestablished. The Mahanikay and Thammayut sects, then, continued to be represented separately by their respective Supreme Patriarchs, who have occasionally adopted different stances on social and political issues. However, an additional ambivalence has been introduced since 2006, with the creation of the superordinate position of Great Supreme Patriarch, not to mention the immediate elevation of Samdech Tep Vong – the former head of the unified sangha of the 1980s and the Supreme Patriarch of the Mahanikay sect from 1991 to 2006 – to that position.

As this chapter will demonstrate, the existence of a division within the sangha's authority in Cambodia, let alone the constitutional recognition of this division, is far from inevitable. Instead, it can be understood as part of a political settlement that sought to end Cambodia's decades-old civil war, and which has subsequently been superseded to some degree by changes in the political landscape, particularly the declining influence of royalism as a political force in Cambodia (Norén-Nilsson 2016b). To convey the historical significance of this configuration of Buddhist authority in Cambodia, and its constitutional recognition, this chapter will start by providing a brief account of the arrival of the Thammayut sect into Cambodia's religious and political milieu, and its gradual consolidation in Cambodia over the course of the French colonial rule. The following section will then sketch the contours of the relationship between sangha and state authority after independence from France, following the overthrow of the monarchy, under Khmer Rouge rule, and during the protracted period of civil war thereafter, noting how the postures of these various regimes were reflected in the corresponding Constitutions of 1947, 1972, 1976, and 1979. The short-lived period under the Constitution of the State of Cambodia provided an opening for the reconstitution of sangha institutions which has in turn shaped the current constitutional order. The remainder of the chapter considers these legacies, examining the design of the new constitutional text and highlighting the ways in which the sangha has manifested its (newly redivided) authority in Cambodia since 1993. It ends with a discussion of the creation of the position of Great Supreme Patriarch in 2006, noting its symbolic implications and placing those implications in the broader sociopolitical context of contemporary Cambodia. This chapter will ultimately demonstrate that the structure of sangha authority in Cambodia continues to be the subject of political influence and intervention.

11.2 OF ROYAL IMPORT: THE THAMMAYUT SECT AND IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Mahanikay sect, which remains the largest monastic order in Cambodia, traces its roots back to the arrival of Theravāda Buddhism in the Angkorian empire

(Kent 2016, 378). Initially influencing only the ruling elite, as reflected in the fact that many princes are said to have ordained as monks as part of their training for effective leadership, Theravāda Buddhism was increasingly widespread in the general Khmer population by the fourteenth century (Yang Sam 1987, 1, 7). As Alexandra Kent explains, “[w]hile Hinduism seems to have been . . . fairly irrelevant to daily life in the villages, Theravāda Buddhism became woven into the fabric of rural life.” The fact that “young village men could now acquire religious credentials by ordaining as Buddhist monks” allowed for a “socially diverse” sangha to develop in a decentralised manner across the Kingdom (Kent 2016, 379). Whether as a result of this shift in social and political ordering, of infighting within the ruling elite, or of external factors, the newly Theravāda Buddhist kingdom soon went into a prolonged decline (known as the “middle period” in Cambodian historiography). This was catalyzed by the sacking first of Angkor, and then of the short-lived alternative capital in Longvek. As a result, while the center of the Kingdom’s (diminishing) political authority moved southeast to Udong (near the current capital of Phnom Penh), the center of its Buddhist influence moved to Ayutthaya, and eventually to Bangkok. In the words of the historian, Alain Forest, “[m]onks destined to become the most respected Venerables of the Cambodian sangha came to the monasteries of these two capitals,” while from a religious perspective Udong became “little more than an extension of its Siamese counterparts” (2008, 23). Nevertheless, historical accounts of the early nineteenth century court in Phnom Penh speak of “a fairly rigid hierarchy” in which the Buddhist patriarchs sat just below the royal family (Harris 2005, 51).

It is in this context that the teachings, practices, and order of the Thammayut sect were established in Cambodia in 1853. Arriving “through the importation of courtly Buddhist practice and thought from Thailand,” Cambodia’s Thammayut fraternity was derived from that established by Mongkut (later, King Rama IV) two decades earlier (Kent 2008, 84). Concerned primarily with monastic practice, which Mongkut perceived to have erred from the word of the Vinaya, the Thammayut movement can be understood as an attempt to purify Buddhist practice by returning to a more direct and strict reading of Pāli scripture. Thammayut texts and teachings, to which much of the more mystical Buddhist practices in Cambodia at the time would have been antithetical, were initially introduced to Cambodia under King Ang Duong, who acquired eighty bundles of texts, and also sent both of his sons (Norodom and Sisowath) to ordain with the fraternity (Peng, Kong & Menzel 2016, 395). However, the commitment of the Cambodian crown to Thammayut teaching was made explicit when Ang Duong’s successor – King Norodom – sponsored the construction of a Thammayut temple next to the royal palace as the Cambodian capital moved to Phnom Penh in 1867 (Edwards 2007, 103–9). That temple, Wat Botum Vadey, remains the center of Thammayut practice in Cambodia today.

Yet, Thammayut teachings appear to have remained the preserve of the aristocracy and urban elite in Cambodia, while the unreformed majority – which came to be known as the Mahanikay – prevailed across the rest of Cambodian society. While

royal patronage was central to its ability to gain a foothold in Phnom Penh, the Thammayut initially also benefited from the support of colonial authorities. As Penny Edwards explains, French “manipulation of strategic alliances with the Thammayut and Mahanikay would fundamentally alter the balance of power between the two sects” (Edwards 2007, 110). Initially sympathetic to the rationalism and modernist ambitions of the reformist movement, colonial authorities later became suspicious of the extent to which Thammayut leaders continued to be influenced by developments, and allied to institutions, in Siam. As the colonial administration’s engagement with Buddhism developed, therefore, French allegiances shifted towards the Mahanikay. By giving preferential opportunities for further religious study abroad, Edwards notes, “French scholars and colonial institutes stymied the monopolization of Cambodia’s ‘national’ religion, Buddhism, by a sect they identified as Siamese in origin and orientation” (Edwards 2007, 112).³ Ultimately, the Thammayut would establish itself in Cambodia, but only in a limited way: a reality which is underlined by the fact that, by the turn of the twentieth century, the Mahanikay made up 97 percent of all temples nationwide, although this number dropped as low as 85 percent in areas around the capital (Harris 2005, 111). The Thammayut sect represented only a small fraction of Cambodia’s monastic community at this time, but it had a concentrated influence close to the center of political power.

The Thammayut’s consolidation in Cambodia occurred contemporaneously with the formalization of Buddhist authority through an attempt at state-led centralization. This process began in 1880, when King Norodom – apparently inspired by Mongkut’s creation of a national sangha in Thailand – ordered the restructuring of the sangha, resulting in the appointment of the most senior Mahanikay monk – Venerable Nil Tieng – to the apex position of Supreme Patriarch, and the elevation of the most senior Thammayut monk – *Samdech Preah Maha Sokhoun Pan* – to the second highest position (Harris 2005, 109). These appointments occurred within a broader milieu that, according to French colonial functionary and author of the 1899 book *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge*, Adhémar Leclère, contained “a multitude of sanghas” (Leclère 1899).

While recognizing Mahanikay ascendancy, this formalized hierarchy nonetheless recognized the coexistence within it of two distinct monastic orders, each with their own hierarchies and leadership. This new status quo was soon refined by French colonial authorities, as they began just two decades later to formalize sangha authority in secular law. Specifically, the authorities of the French Protectorate in Cambodia introduced procedures for the state administration’s registration of temples in 1904, and for its registration of monks and novices in 1916, before

³ Also, note that the shift in the attention of colonial authorities also appears to have precipitated a reformist movement within the Mahanikay, which rose in prominence under French rule over the first half of the twentieth century.

restructuring the sangha nationwide and bringing it under state authority in 1919. In February and September of 1943, meanwhile, the complete restructuring of the sangha hierarchy was ordered by royal decrees that gave the Supreme Patriarchs of the Mahanikay and Thammayut greater independence to appoint chief monks at the provincial level, but still made these appointments subject to approval by the king and the Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs. Ultimately, however, this formal recognition of two distinct monastic fraternities within a single, unified sangha authority belied a social undercurrent of increasing tension, in which both Mahanikay and Thammayut authorities had sought to obstruct one another's activities.⁴ The divisiveness of this situation was most forcefully articulated in the anti-colonial publication *Nagaravatta*, which cited the division as a potential cause for the decline of Buddhism in the country and called for the eradication of divisions within the sangha (albeit without success) under the slogan of "One Nation, One Religion" (Edwards 2007, 208). This phrase would reemerge in the 1980s, as will be discussed shortly.

Cambodia's first formal Constitution was promulgated by King Norodom Sihanouk in 1947, after a drafting process initially led by a joint Franco–Khmer Commission but then taken up by an elected Constituent Assembly. The process eventually produced a draft which largely followed the contours of that of the French Fourth Republic (Jennar 1995, 35–36). One notable change from the first Franco–Khmer Commission draft, which was introduced at the request of King Sihanouk, however, was the introduction of a system of elected (rather than hereditary) monarchy (Jennar 1995, 35–36). This, in turn, demanded the creation of a Crown Council which would lead the selection process; a Council that was chaired by the President of the Family Council of the Royal Family, but also included the President of the National Assembly, the President of the Council of the Kingdom, the President of the Council of Ministers, and the Supreme Patriarchs of both the Mahanikay and Thammayut monastic orders (Article 28). Beyond the inclusion of the two Supreme Patriarchs on the Crown Council, reference to Buddhism, or religion more generally, can be found in Article 8, guaranteeing freedom of religion, and recognizing Buddhism as "the religion of the state," and Article 49, which explicitly excludes members of the sangha from the principle of universal suffrage. The 1947 Constitution also refers to the King as *dhammika mahareach* ("great

⁴ For example, Harris notes that "The hostility is illustrated by the fate of the *Vinayavaṃṇā*, the foundation document of the Thammayut, which tells how King Mongkut came to see the need for reform of monastic Buddhism in Siam. It was first translated from Thai into Khmer in 1912, but this first edition is now quite rare because traditionalist members of the Mahanikay were successful in ensuring its systematic destruction" (2005, 108). Meanwhile, Edwards suggests that "[m]any Thammayut monks were actively obstructing the diffusion of the Royal Library's 'works of popularization' in their key zones of influence, namely Battambang, Siem Reap, and Sisophon" (2007, 205).

righteous king”), implying that he was the protector and patron of Buddhism, and the embodiment of rightful rule according to Buddhist principles.

The period which followed full independence from France – which was finally negotiated by Sihanouk in 1953 – is frequently referred to in glowing terms. In his book, *Khmer Buddhism and Politics from 1954 to 1984*, for example, Yang Sam claims that “this time was probably the peak period of modern Khmer Buddhism” (1987, 2). The Buddhist credentials of Sihanouk’s post-independence rule (first as king, then as president, and later in a hybrid prince-and-head-of-state role) are discussed at length elsewhere (Harris 2005, 144–56). However, it is worth noting that, in the context of general growth in the size of the Buddhist sangha, this period actually saw a relative decline in the size and influence of the Thammayut sect. From a total of 202 monasteries at the moment of independence, there were only 139 still operating by 1970, while the number of Mahanikay temples increased from 2,461 to 3,369 in the same period (Yang Sam 1987, 17). This decline in the Thammayut sect is attributed by Yang Sam to a generalized unwillingness to abandon ritual practices (typically associated with Brahmanical and animist traditions), a reluctance amongst rural Cambodians to send their children to ordain in Thammayut temples which tended to be concentrated around the capital of Phnom Penh, and the emergence of a dynamic reformist movement within the Mahanikay. As a result, there appears to have been an increasingly widely felt sentiment that the Thammayut order enhanced division and disharmony in Cambodia’s monastic and lay community, because it “emphasized the division of social classes between the royalty, the rich and the poor” (Yang Sam 1987, 17). While this divisiveness is frequently remarked upon by historical accounts of the period, it did not manifest in open confrontations within the sangha.

Serious divisions within the sangha became increasingly evident as, in 1970, Cambodia descended into civil war. The fall of the Kingdom of Cambodia, courtesy of parliament’s dismissal of Sihanouk as Head of State, and the seizing of power by military General Lon Nol, had the support of many notable figures within the sangha, particularly reformist elements within the Mahanikay sect. Venerable Khieu Chum, for example, gained notoriety for his critique of the sangha’s dependence on monarchy, which he argued the Buddha himself had rejected, and after the coup became a prominent supporter of republicanism. Khieu Chum’s vision of a republican but nonetheless Buddhist Cambodia – which he articulated with increasing clarity after 1970 (Harris 2008, 98) – would also inspire later political leaders, such as Heng Samrin during the early 1980s (Yang Sam 1987, 83). Meanwhile, only private appeals from then Mahanikay Supreme Patriarch, Huot Tat, prevented a significant number of Thammayut monks from embarking on a march to protest the overthrow of Sihanouk and the imminent dissolution of the monarchy.

The Khmer Republic – which was eventually formalized in the 1972 Constitution – was far from secular, let alone anticlerical. Lon Nol himself

described the ongoing civil war, against the communist insurrection led by the Khmer Rouge, as “a religious war” against a “*thmil*” (devil/atheist) enemy (Harris 2005, 174). Article 2 of the Constitution of the Khmer Republic also recognized Buddhism as the state religion. The removal of the monarchy meant that the Crown Council had been dispensed with, thereby removing previous references to the leaders of the Thammayut and Mahanikay sects in the new charter. Nevertheless, Lon Nol had already reassured both leaders in the months after the coup that: “the present radical change of political rule is not meant to be prejudicial to Buddhism, which remains the state religion as it has up till now” (Harris 2012, 16).

The subsequent rise of the Khmer Rouge was a disaster for Buddhism. Though a number of Buddhist monks appear to have been involved in the Indochinese Communist Party and then the Communist Party of Kampuchea in earlier years, the Khmer Rouge’s four years of rule under the Democratic Kampuchea regime were characterized by the complete destruction of religious institutions, the systematic elimination of Buddhist leadership, and the generalized defrocking and mistreatment of monks from urban centers. Inevitably, the Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea, promulgated in 1975, did not recognize a state religion, and although it did purport to recognize the right to worship in Article 20, it simultaneously forbade the worship of any “reactionary religion which is detrimental to Democratic Cambodia and the Cambodian people.” This latter prohibition appears to have been interpreted so broadly as to prohibit the practice of any religion, other than the animism of highland communities. Whether as a result of an intentional policy of eradication or not, less than 100 – and by some estimates only 12 – Cambodian monks survived the Democratic Kampuchea period, meaning that some 80,000 monks had been lost over the course of a period in which almost a quarter of the population died from either exhaustion, starvation, disease, torture or execution (Yang Sam 1987, 81; Kent 2016, 383).

11.3 RECONSTRUCTING THE SANGHA

The fall of Democratic Kampuchea, then, might have provided an opportunity to rebuild Buddhist institutions in the wake of the destruction wrought by Khmer Rouge rule. Though the Vietnamese-installed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was ideologically opposed to the promotion of Buddhism, it nevertheless “allowed the restoration of temples and a restricted revival of the sangha” in order to accrue some much-needed legitimacy (Kent 2008, 383). Strict limits were introduced on the expansion of the sangha, preventing anyone under the age of fifty from ordaining, and limiting to four the number of monks residing at any particular temple (Marston 2009). Meanwhile, historical accounts of the period describe a situation in which Buddhism was made wholly subservient to the authority of the party (the National United Front Salvation of Kampuchea, herein the Front) and the PRK state. As John Marston explains, the restored sangha “was considered a mass

organization structurally parallel to labor unions and the women's association," such that newly appointed Buddhist leaders (officially ordained at a ceremony in 1975) were nonetheless "under the administrative direction of Front officials." Temple (*wat*) committees that were primarily constituted by laypeople exercised "great power over the direction of the *wat*," ensuring some portion of donations would be directed to broader community initiatives (Marston 2009, 225–26). As such, Buddhist monks were treated as "state employees" and were expected to sustain themselves by growing vegetables on temple land. The unique reality of this status is similarly reflected in the fact that monks were formally enfranchised and allowed to run for public office for the first time by way of Article 31 of the 1979 Constitution of the People's Republic of Kampuchea.⁵

Meanwhile, Buddhist authority was reconstituted in the form a single, unified sangha (the "Front order," or *braḥ sangh raṇasirsa*). After being one of seven people to take part in the first official ordination ceremony, which was overseen by a group of Theravāda monks brought in from Vietnam, Tep Vong was soon selected to sit at the apex of the new monastic order, as well as to sit as the vice president of the National Assembly. Although this privileged political position could be perceived as a recognition of the status of Buddhist authority, it is better understood – particularly from a historical perspective that recognizes the conventional separation between Buddhist and state authority – as an attempt to ensure the subservience of the sangha hierarchy to the state. From his position in the National Assembly, for example, Tep Vong is reported to have offered justifications for state-led political violence against domestic political dissent, which he sought to base in Buddhist doctrine.

Meanwhile, the sangha over which Tep Vong now presided as President (*pradhān*) – rather than Supreme Patriarch (*sanghareach*), with its royal connotations – was officially one without sects or divisions. "Now we make no difference between the two orders; there is at present only one sangha," Tep Vong is reported to have told a Vietnamese reporter. Another senior monk – Oum Soum – later remarked that "our monks are neither Mahanikay nor Thammayut but are Nationalist monks" (Yang Sam 1987, 86). However, some accounts indicate that in reality the teaching and practice of the sangha at the time leaned heavily towards Mahanikay rather than Thammayut conventions in all relevant respects. Writing in 1987, for example, Yang Sam explains that the "overall practices [of the unified *braḥ sangh raṇasirsa*] are those of the Mahanikay order" (1987, 87). In response, there appear to have been some attempts to reestablish a Thammayut monastic order, which were suppressed on the basis that any Buddhist institutions outside of the officially recognized order were illegal. That these initiatives appear to have been so swiftly and categorically dealt with by Front or PRK authorities suggests that there was a particular sensitivity to any potential for an alternative locus of Buddhist

⁵ As Tomas Larsson explains, the (re)enfranchisement of Buddhist monks was typically the preserve of the "most virulently anti-religious and anti-clerical regimes" (2015, 71).

authority to develop, given that this could provide a challenge to the legitimacy of the *braḥ saṅgh raṇasirsa*. By contrast, the establishment of unofficial *wats*, which circumvented the rigid registration restrictions imposed by the state, were relatively commonplace at this time (Bektimirova 2002).

11.4 THE RETURN OF A DIVIDED SANGHA

The most recent reconstitution of Buddhist authority in Cambodia was ultimately precipitated by global events. The Soviet policy of *perestroika*, which saw the reduction of aid to Vietnam as part of the gradual winding-down of the Cold War, ultimately forced Hanoi to reconsider its support for the PRK regime. Plans for the first withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia were announced in May 1988 (Cima 1989). This, in turn, prompted Hun Sen, who had become prime minister of the PRK three years prior, to undertake a series of fundamental reforms, starting with the almost immediate lifting of limits on ordination to the sangha and culminating in the promulgation of the Constitution of the State of Cambodia (SoC) in 1989. While the Constitution of the SoC bore many similarities to that which had preceded it, it also contained a number of significant changes. Alongside the reintroduction of private property and the shift away from a planned economy, for instance, the SoC Constitution in Article 6 reinstated Buddhism as the state religion and removed provisions of Article 31 which had previously enfranchised Buddhist monks. The new constitutional recognition of Buddhism's special status was accompanied by a public apology from Hun Sen for the "mistakes" made toward religion over the previous decade of the Front's rule (Harris 2005, 200).

While significant in themselves, the reforms of the State of Cambodia era must also be understood as symbolic moves designed to further open up the opportunity for a comprehensive peace agreement to end the country's ongoing civil war.⁶ Negotiations toward this settlement had begun by the middle of 1988, at the First Jakarta Informal Meeting, and culminated in the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements on October 23, 1991. In this context, steps such as the constitutional recognition in 1989 of Buddhism as the state religion must be understood as attempts to reassure other warring parties and the international community. As John Marston explains: "the reforms represented the country as amenable to basic changes of the kind that would make a settlement with resistance factions feasible" (2009, 226).

Significant structural changes to the sangha, meanwhile, began apace toward the end of 1991, after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords enabled the return of Norodom Sihanouk in November of that year. The *braḥ saṅgh raṇasirsa* was

⁶ Since the fall of Democratic Kampuchea, the civil war had pitted the Front and its Vietnamese patrons against a coalition made up of the royalist FUNCINPEC (*Front uni national pour un Cambodge indépendant, neutre, pacifique et coopératif*), the anti-communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and remnants of the Khmer Rouge, which still controlled significant portions of the country's western and southwestern provinces.

promptly dissolved, and the returning former king appears to have immediately (and unofficially) resumed a role as patron of the sangha. As such, Sihanouk awarded Tep Vong the royally imbued title of *Sanghareach*, and concurrently applied the same title to the prominent, Paris-based Thammayut monk, Bou Kry, whose temple had accommodated Sihanouk's son (Prince Sihamoni) when he ordained as a monk almost a decade earlier. By February 1992, the separate monastic orders of Mahanikay and Thammayut sects had been fully reconstituted. The two Supreme Patriarchs, Tep Vong and Bou Kry, respectively, sat at the apex of the two newly reconstituted hierarchies, with power to appoint Chief Monks at province, municipality, district, and village level via *preah sangha prakas* (sangha decrees), with the cosignature of the Minister for Cults and Religious Affairs (Peng, Kong & Menzel 2016, 411). Though there is no reference to the sangha or to Buddhism in the Accords,⁷ it seems likely that this reconstitution of the sangha, along lines closely resembling that which had existed prior to the fall of the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1970, was at least an implicit – if not explicitly agreed but unwritten – aspect of the broader political settlement.

Cambodia's peace-time state authority, then, was reconstituted after that of its religious authorities. In an eighteen-month process beginning in March 1992, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia assumed responsibility for the functions of the Cambodian state, sought to oversee the disarmament of the warring factions, and administered elections in May 1993. Ahead of that election, both *samdech* Tep Vong and *samdech* Bou Kry unsuccessfully sought to secure an exception to the universal franchise, so as to prevent monks from both monastic orders being allowed to vote for what would be the first time in the country's history (Larsson 2015). The denial of this request by the head of the UNTAC mission, Yasushi Akashi, ultimately set a precedent whereby monks have been formally included in the franchise ever since, much to the chagrin of the two patriarchs. Nevertheless, the Constituent Assembly formed by the 1993 elections, in which the royalist FUNCINPEC won a narrow majority, went on to draft a constitution (promulgated on September 24, 1993) which restored Cambodia to the status of constitutional monarchy, and otherwise synthesized key features of the amended 1947 Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the 1989 Constitution of the State of Cambodia: Article 4 of the Constitution restored the national motto of "Nation, Religion, King"; Article 43 reaffirmed the special status of Buddhism as the state religion; and Article 68 provided the state with a duty to "develop Pāli schools and Buddhist institutes." Along with the reinstatement of the monarchy, meanwhile, in Article 13 came the reforming of the Council of the Throne, wherein the

⁷ There is also virtually no mention of religion more broadly, other than the general commitment to human rights in Part 3 of the Accords and a guarantee provided in Annex 5 that the Constitution due to be drafted pursuant to UN-administered elections would include the right to freedom of religion and a prohibition against religious discrimination.

Supreme Patriarchs of the Mahanikay and Thammayut were joined by the president and first and second vice presidents of the National Assembly, the prime minister, and (after the formation of the Upper House in 1999) by the president and first and second vice presidents of the Senate.

Most scholars view the UNTAC experiment and its legacies as having been a heavily qualified success, particularly with regard to its purported democracy-building mandate. A major reason for this was that Cambodia's multi-party political settlement could not be reconciled with an institutional context that otherwise remained overwhelmingly dominated by the Cambodian People's Party (herein, CPP).⁸ Many of these dynamics were paralleled in the reconstituted sangha. This is most clearly embodied by Tep Vong, who remained at the top of the sangha hierarchy (as Supreme Patriarch of the Mahanikay sect) after 1993, despite his close association with the PRK regime. This continuity has, according to Alexandra Kent, meant that Tep Vong – and much of the hierarchy of the post-1993 Cambodian sangha more generally – “continues to be popularly viewed as the religious mouthpiece of a Vietnamese-friendly [CPP] government,” in spite of the formal independence that has been afforded to Buddhist institutions (Kent 2008, 85). In the newly reestablished Thammayut order, meanwhile, positions of significant influence were actually held by other CPP-affiliated, Mahanikay-educated monks. The position immediately below Bou Kry, Ian Harris notes, was filled by the Oum Soum, who had himself been a prominent figure in the *brah̄ sangh raṇasirsa* of the 1980s (Harris 2005, 214–15). Similarly, the lay chairman of the Pagoda Council at Wat Botum Vadey – the temple built by King Norodom as the center of the Thammayut sect and, after 1992, the home of Bou Kry⁹ – was none other than the father of Hun Sen (Harris 2005, 215). According to Harris, the positioning of such figures can be understood as an attempt to surveil the Thammayut order, which was likely to have been viewed with suspicion by the CPP even after the uneasy and fragile peace had been established. In fact, Harris states that “it could be argued that they are well placed to feed intelligence to the relevant authorities” (Harris 2005, 214–15). While appointments within each order were ostensibly the prerogative of their respective *Sanghareach*, there are indications that these decisions were subject to political influence and intervention at the local level. Alexandra Kent, for example, reports data showing that “head monks are not always elected by the monks but may instead be instated through the support of local politically supported officials” (Kent 2008, 89). Though formally reconstituted as two distinct orders, and to a large extent formally independent from the state, the order of the Thammayut

⁸ The CPP was the new name given in 1991 to the National United Front Salvation of Kampuchea, which had ruled Cambodia with Vietnamese support since the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

⁹ Although historically the center of the Thammayut monastic order, and still of central importance to the sect, the majority of monks at Wat Botum Vadey are also now Mahanikay.

was – from 1992 – largely in a process of transition which reflected the broader political change that was ongoing in Cambodia.

11.5 POST-1993 PRACTICE

Despite their new configuration and the relative autonomy it appeared to confer, the Thammayut and Mahanikay sects were largely unified in the public positions on significant social and political questions. One issue where daylight was visible between the two, however, was in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic that gathered momentum after the departure of UNTAC (Ledgerwood 1994). The difference in posture between the Supreme Patriarchs of the two orders came to a head in 2000, around a conference organized for Buddhist monks by the National AIDS Authority, with significant support from international donors. Specifically, Tep Vong made only a brief appearance at the conference, and later explained that his reticence reflected a more fundamental skepticism about the involvement of monks in HIV/AIDS education or support to people with HIV/AIDS. Suggesting that the extent of the epidemic had been inflated by the CPP's political opponents in order to discredit the ruling party, Tep Vong argued that the official figure of 170,000 was incorrect and that only around 30,000 people had contracted HIV (Post Staff 2000). Meanwhile, the Supreme Patriarch argued, the holding of workshops brought unwanted attention, since “the more people who attend the meeting, the more people will tell the world Cambodia is not good” (Post Staff 2000). Rather, Tep Vong appears to have advocated a more hardline approach, suggesting the government should first crack down on vice in the country before involving monks in awareness-raising activities, and ultimately suggested the sangha's stance should be to withhold support, since those who were suffering were only being punished for their immorality: a kind of karmic justice. “If we help sick people, then we will only encourage them not to be afraid of catching the virus,” Tep Vong also explained “[i]f you support the people with AIDS then we openly broadcast to the world we support AIDS” (Post Staff 2000).

The Supreme Patriarch's stance was not shared throughout the Mahanikay sect, of which he was the premier authority, however, as many monks were profoundly involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS across the country, and in offering care to people with AIDS. Neither was the stance shared by the Thammayut Supreme Patriarch. In contrast to Tep Vong, Bou Kry was more conciliatory towards those suffering from the disease and largely supportive of monks' engagement with the HIV/AIDS issue. “The subject should be mixed with Buddhist sermons – and every monk has to do that,” the Thammayut Supreme Patriarch told the English-language *Phnom Penh Post* newspaper, before explicitly dismissing the idea of suppression as a strategy and advocating education as “the best way.” Finally, Bou Kry called on monks “to give moral support to the sick [with AIDS] so they can die peacefully – even though they have committed a bad thing” (Post Staff 2000). On what was an

increasingly politicized societal issue, in other words, the division of the sangha between Mahanikay and Thammayut orders – as well as the heterogeneity of practice that was possible within the former – allowed for Cambodia’s Buddhist monks to be prominently involved in the dissemination of information about HIV/AIDS, and in the provision of important services to its sufferers at a time when state capacity was still profoundly limited.

Simultaneously, tensions between the two orders threatened to surface over a more overtly political issue: the deaths of sixteen supporters of the opposition politician Sam Rainsy, who were killed by a grenade attack in the public park immediately outside of Wat Botum Vadey in March 1997. Sam Rainsy, it seems, had already established a relationship with the Thammayut Supreme Patriarch, who resided at the Wat Botum Vadey temple at the time: both had been part of the Cambodian diaspora in France during the 1980s, at which point Bou Kry is rumored to have told worshipers to donate to the FUNCINPEC party, with whom Sam Rainsy was affiliated at the time (Harris 2005, 214). Meanwhile, Sam Rainsy had himself spent three weeks ordained as a monk at the temple just a year prior to the attack. Although Bou Kry steered clear of any comment at the time of the killings, he provided some measured remarks to journalists three years later, as supporters of Sam Rainsy sought to erect a stupa in the park to memorialize the dead. Aware that three previous such memorials had been removed or destroyed by authorities, Bou Kry told journalists that he was “very concerned” about the fate of the fourth iteration, noting that the stupa contained a Buddha statue and that any damage done to the statue “would be like they were attacking the Buddhist religion” (O’Connell and Saroeun 2000). The Supreme Patriarch’s sympathy, however, may have been made clearer when the stupa was temporarily rehoused within the walls of Wat Botum Vadey. In the context of a profoundly polarized political context, and in light of Bou Kry’s general opposition to Buddhist figures engaging in politics, such support (muted though it was) can be understood as a politically symbolic gesture.

The two Supreme Patriarchs have also been engaged in political matters when called upon to participate in the deliberations of the Council of the Throne, confirming King Sihamoni’s ascension in 2004. This process was complicated by the fact that Sihamoni was to be selected as king in the wake of his father’s abdication of the throne, an event for which there was no provision made in the constitutional articles relating to royal succession. Sihanouk’s abdication came in the midst of a post-election political crisis (Peou 2006). As with the elections five years earlier (Khuy 1998), the 2003 elections had seen the CPP win a majority of seats in the National Assembly but fall short of the super-majority needed to form a government. Initially the CPP failed in attempts to form a coalition with opposition parties who disputed the results of the election. Provided a “supreme role as arbitrator to ensure the regular execution of public powers” by Article 9 of the Constitution, Sihanouk’s frustrations with the dysfunction of Cambodia’s political

system and the inability of the parties to reach a compromise, which he described as a “dishonorable deadlock” (Yun 2003), came to the fore as he repeatedly threatened to abdicate the throne (Yun 2004). By contrast, Bou Kry appears not to have intervened to stop Sihanouk from abdicating. Instead, shortly after King Sihanouk had formally issued his notice of abdication, Bou Kry publicly stated his support for Norodom Sihamoni to assume the throne. “Prince Sihamoni deserves the position because it belongs to him,” the Thammayut Supreme Patriarch explained, noting that the prince – who had previously ordained as a Thammayut monk at a temple in France in 1981, where he came under Bou Kry’s personal guidance – had immediately sought his personal advice after hearing of the abdication (Lor & Leung 2021). The contrast between these two positions – Tep Vong’s attempt to persuade Sihanouk to remain on the throne and Bou Kry’s close involvement in preparing Sihamoni to succeed his father, which he did in October 2004 – hint at the ongoing closeness between the royal family and the Thammayut sect, if not also the Mahanikay Patriarch’s view of the throne as a symbol of political stability, compromise and, ultimately, legitimacy for the ruling party (Lawrence 2020).

A significant alteration to the configuration of the sangha hierarchies was made in 2006, though this was not reflected in any change in the composition of the Council of the Throne, let alone the text of the Constitution more generally. Specifically, a new position of Great Supreme Patriarch was established by royal decree (No. NS/RKT/0506/207, 2006), with Tep Vong being appointed, and his previous position as Supreme Patriarch of the Mahanikay being filled by his former deputy, Nuon Nget (Royal Decree No. PS/RKT/0406/200, 2006). As such, a figure who had until that point been the Supreme Patriarch of the Mahanikay, and who had himself presided over the unified *brah̄ saṅgh raṇasirsa* of the 1980s, became the ultimate authority within the Cambodian sangha once again. Tep Vong became the first Supreme Patriarch to represent both the Mahanikay and Thammayut orders of the Cambodian sangha since Nil Teang was appointed to a similar position in 1859. The move, which was signed by the recently crowned King Sihamoni, was immediately criticized by opponents and dissidents. One former monk, Chin Channa, who himself claimed to have been “hounded out” of the sangha due to his interest in politics, described the change at the time as “politically made only to undermine and downgrade the Dhammayuth [sic] and put it under the influence of the CPP,” and noted that the move had been made possible by a political context in which “royalists are declining.” Striking a similar tone to that of Chin Channa, opposition political leader Sam Rainsy similarly argued that “[t]he best way to maintain peace as it is today, is to please keep it [the structure of sangha authority] the same.” This call went unheeded, however, and a year later a royalist-affiliated newspaper,¹⁰

¹⁰ *Khmer Amatak News* was informally associated with Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the former leader of FUNCINPEC who had – at this point – formed his own eponymous political party, the NRP.

Khmer Amatak News, was threatened with closure after it published a story praising Thammaiyut Supreme Patriarch Bou Kry for his ability to rise above politics and accusing Tep Vong of using his position to act as “the CPP’s spokesman” (Yun 2007).¹¹

Despite having won enough seats in the National Assembly in the 2003 elections to avert a super-majority for the CPP, the royalist political movement was clearly on the wane. This decline was not helped by the abdication (and withdrawal from political life) of Sihanouk, with whom the vast majority of royalist political prestige continued to adhere (Norén-Nilsson 2016a, 2016b). Ultimately, the reality of this decline was borne out two years later, when the royalist opposition parties (namely, FUNCINPEC and the Norodom Ranariddh Party that splintered from it) were resoundingly defeated in the 2008 elections.¹² The return, recognition, and then relative relegation of the Thammaiyut vis-à-vis the more popular Mahanikay sect can be understood to reflect the plight of royalism as a political force, and even the direction of Cambodia’s post-conflict political settlement more generally. In other words, both the reintroduction in 1992 of the Thammaiyut order to Cambodia and the subsequent elevation of a Mahanikay Supreme Patriarch (and particularly Tep Vong) to a position of ascendancy over his Thammaiyut counterpart less than fifteen years later are symptomatic of changes in the post-conflict political settlement in Cambodia. Just as the former development reflected the progress of a peace process in which the ruling CPP was compelled to compromise with royalist political and military opponents led by Sihanouk, so the latter can be understood as a consequence of the extent to which that compromise had subsequently been superseded by political developments, and thus abandoned.

11.6 CONCLUSION

The constitution of Buddhist authority, and of the two monastic orders that make up contemporary Cambodia’s sangha, then, has historically been subject to broader political shifts in Cambodian society. That trend continues to hold into the present day. Since its royally sanctioned introduction to Cambodia in 1853, members of the Thammaiyut sect have remained a minority within Cambodia’s sangha community. Initially encouraged by colonial authorities who identified with the order’s commitment to rationalization, the Thammaiyut fell out of favor with the French as suspicion grew around its connection to Thailand. Royal patronage of the Thammaiyut remained a constant, however. As such, from Cambodia’s first written constitution,

¹¹ Within the year, the outlet had seen its license suspended as it became embroiled in another dispute, this time with another figure from within the now fractious and fragmented royalist movement (Lor 2007).

¹² In fact, aside from the 2018 elections (the results of which were foreclosed by the dissolution of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party less than a year prior), the 2008 elections stand as an anomaly in Cambodia’s post-1993 electoral history, as the only elections in which the CPP was able to muster more than 50 percent of the popular vote.

promulgated in 1947, the place of the Thammayut has largely run alongside the place of the monarchy. After being accorded equivalent status from 1947, and through the immediate post-independence era dominated by Norodom Sihanouk, the division of authority within the sangha was maintained by the Khmer Republic, albeit without the constitutional recognition that came with the existence of a Crown Council. While the Cambodian sangha then suffered almost universally at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, it was Thammayut authority that was most notably sidelined during the initial (limited) rebirth of Buddhist institutions in the 1980s, as the People's Republic of Kampuchea recognized only a homogenous, unified sangha that officially knew no sectarian difference but, in reality, largely favored Mahanikay practice. The return of a divided sangha, intriguingly, was a religious representation of what was supposed to be a moment of increasing unity thereafter, as the peace negotiations of 1988–91 were paralleled by increased religious freedom and, eventually, the reconstitution of separate Mahanikay and Thammayut orders.

From one vantage point, Cambodia's contemporary configuration of Buddhist authority appears quite similar to that which existed at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, a Great Supreme Patriarch sat alone at the apex of the hierarchy of sangha authority, with separate sect-specific Supreme Patriarchs for the Mahanikay and Thammayut immediately beneath him. In this role, Tep Vong appears able to exert a palpable influence over questions of monastic discipline and practice, as well as to claim a singular symbolic significance as the primary representative of Cambodia's state religion. Yet, the text of the Constitution, and particularly the provisions of Article 13 on the Council of the Throne, continue to evoke a relative equivalence between the two sects by including only the two Supreme Patriarchs. This ambivalence may reflect the particular significance of the Thammayut to the institution of the monarchy, meaning that the Thammayut leadership is permitted greater prominence in questions relating to the crown than in other matters. Alternatively, it may simply be the result of a reluctance to change the constitutional text to acknowledge what may yet turn out to be a temporary status quo. It is not clear, in other words, whether the position of Great Supreme Patriarch will be a permanent feature in the configuration of Cambodia's sangha hierarchy, or whether it is considered to inhere with the particular person of Tep Vong. What is clear, however, is that Tep Vong's current preeminence, and his ascendancy to the position of Great Supreme Patriarch, along with any attempt to maintain that position whenever Tep Vong's occupancy to it comes to an end, is a reflection of political contingencies in Cambodian society, particularly the place of royalism as a political movement and the monarchy as a social institution in Cambodia.

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