



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Cambodia 1967–75

Executive Summary

In 1967, the Communist Party of Kampuchea initiated an eight-year armed conflict with the Kingdom of Cambodia that left between 275,000 and 310,000 dead.¹ The conflict emerged from a period of immense instability both within Cambodia and in the wider Indochina peninsula. During the late 1960s, Prince Norodom Sihanouk lost support from Cambodia's conservatives due to economic woes and the presence of the People's Army of North Vietnam and Viet Cong troops in the country's eastern regions.² In September 1966, the conservatives, likely with the assistance of election interference, won a majority in the National Assembly, and General Lon Nol was elected as prime minister.³ In March 1970, when Sihanouk was out of the country, a Communist-supported rebellion broke out in Battambang Province. Lon Nol declared martial law and brutally suppressed the rebellion, inadvertently driving many peasants into supporting the Communist Party of Kampuchea, also known as the Khmer Rouge.⁴

In January 1968, the small Khmer Rouge initiated its first offensive to seize weapons and spread propaganda.⁵ In response, Sihanouk reevaluated his relationships with Communist factions and accepted Lon Nol's suggestion to reestablish ties with the United States. Under Operation Menu and Operation Freedom Deal, the United States, with dubious support from Sihanouk, extensively bombed regions of Cambodia harboring Communists from Vietnam and Cambodia.⁶

In 1970, while Sihanouk was visiting China and the USSR, the National Assembly voted to remove Sihanouk from power, and Lon Nol took control of the government.⁷ Sihanouk allied himself with the Khmer Rouge and, with support from North Vietnam, formed the Royal Government of National Union of Kampuchea (GRUNK) to fight against Lon Nol.⁸ The war widened in March 1970 when North Vietnam launched an offensive that overran much of northwestern Cambodia. Despite US support, the Khmer Republic struggled against Communist forces. In 1973, the Paris Peace Accords ended the conflict in South Vietnam, but the Khmer Rouge continued its fight. The United States conducted a massive aerial bombardment of the countryside, but the Khmer Rouge persisted.⁹ During this time, Sihanouk's influence in the insurgency fell as Communists began to dominate the movement. In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh and the Lon Nol government collapsed.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. In 1967, the Cambodian population was dominated by the Khmer ethnic group with a unique national identity tied to a deep-rooted history and Cambodian Buddhism.¹⁰

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes → No. Despite the immense polarization that characterized politics in Cambodia in the 1960s, at the start of the conflict, the majority of the population saw the government under Sihanouk as legitimate. With the National Assembly’s decision to remove Sihanouk from power and the rising popularity of the Khmer Rouge insurgency, however, the government’s legitimacy was challenged.¹¹

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s overall population?

Yes → No. The government was initially able to secure 85 percent of the population from contact with the Khmer Rouge, but guerilla influence expanded, especially toward the end of the conflict. While, at first, the Khmer Rouge was quite small and remained restricted to the countryside, by 1970, the insurgency had surged and began threatening much of the country.¹² The North Vietnamese offensive in March 1970 overran government forces in much of northwestern Cambodia.¹³ By the end of 1973, successful Communist offensives left the government in control of only Phnom Penh, some provincial towns, and portions of the northwest. It should also be emphasized that efforts to achieve security, including US bombing campaigns and actions by the Khmer Republic, led to grievances in the local population and may have made Communist sympathizers swell in number.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No. While the Khmer Rouge and GRUNK received extensive support from the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, Cambodian Communist forces remained within Cambodia.¹⁴

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. Although poorly equipped and numbering only 30,000 men at the beginning of the conflict, the Kingdom of Cambodia had a standing and self-sustaining force.¹⁵ As the conflict progressed, recruits to the Cambodian army swelled, reaching a high of around 200,000 in 1973.¹⁶

CAMBODIA 1967–75	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES → NO
POPULATION SECURITY	YES → NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Outcome

Government loss. The fall of Phnom Penh in the spring of 1975 marked the downfall of the Lon Nol regime. Government officials were subsequently executed, and the populace of Phnom Penh was driven into the countryside on catastrophic forced marches. The Khmer Rouge gained control over the country and initiated a period of radical and disastrous societal transformation. This case study is unique in that the government during the conflict evolved from the Kingdom of Cambodia to the Khmer Republic after the deposition of Sihanouk. While the government was opposed to the Khmer Rouge in both of its forms, the government technically was not uniform throughout the conflict. Assuming the term government refers to both the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Khmer Republic, the case does fit the findings of the study. Government loss stemmed from an inability to protect the population in the later stages of the conflict and a falling legitimacy.

Endnotes

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5. Chandler, *Tragedy of Cambodian History*.
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