

# The Concept of the Political Philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk\*

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## Abstract

The purposes of this research were 1) to study the concepts of political philosophy, 2) to explore the political philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk, and 3) to analyze King Norodom Sihanouk's political philosophy. The research is document research and applied Philosophy abased, utilizing primary and secondary academic documents and related research works, with analysis conducted through inductive reasoning.

### The results revealed that:

1. The concept of political philosophy, influenced by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, showcases the relationship between individuals and state power in terms of freedom, equality, and justice, aiming for the citizens' peace and happiness.
2. King Norodom Sihanouk's political concepts, integrating Buddhist teachings, the Dasa Raja Dhamma (Ten Royal Virtues), Brahmavihāra, and Brahmanism principles, Raja Dhamma aligned with Cambodian culture and beliefs, were applied in governance. This adaptation in governance made him a beloved monarch and was acclaimed as a "Righteous King". In practical way, King Norodom Sihanouk's political philosophy blends traditional Cambodian monarchy, Buddhism, and modern nationalism. He emphasizes Cambodian sovereignty, neutrality during the Cold War, and balancing monarchy and republican aspirations. Sihanouk's leadership style is rooted in paternalistic principles, Buddhist ethics, and the vision of Sangkum Reastr Niyum (People's Socialist Community)

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as a unique political experiment in Cambodia.

**Keywords:** Concept; Political Philosophy; King Norodom Sihanouk

## 1. Introduction

His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk was a great King of Cambodia. He has greatly done for the sake of the Kingdom of Cambodia, especially his wise royal patronage which led to the country being more prosperous, including economic growth, international relations, and cultural perspective of unity during his reign. As for, (Jeldres, 2003), sees the King as a smart strategist to resolve the national issue, so he asserted that the former Cambodian monarch and head of state, a strategist of weak-state diplomacy unequalled in contemporary international politics, had astutely managed Cambodia's relations with China and Communist North Vietnam in the 1960s, keeping his country in peace, while the war-ravaged in neighboring Vietnam and parts of Laos.

But other scholars found different views, like academician (Chantrabot, 2017), in his dissertation in French wrote in chapter 5 that the feature of Cambodian political life, especially the King Father always use of the word "compromise" should be kept in mind, there is not a political stance but it is facilitation manner, and not on consensus,

an economic, social, educational, agricultural or health sectors.

In contrast, the word "compromise" in the Cambodian political context refers to the balance of power divisions between the various factions that are involved in government. King Norodom Sihanouk has a very high art of coordinating, organizing, and defining in detail the composition of the members who have to serve in the government, but those members of the government have never had the same political aspirations and ideals. Such a political perspective could give the impression that Cambodia is a Democrat because the leaders of each current are present at the peak of their power. All Cambodian politicians are also involved in indebted King Norodom Sihanouk, for instance, in arranging the match, "Lon Nol's National Salvation Government" on August 14, 1969, both King Norodom Sihanouk and his civil servants, as well as Prince Sisowath Sirikmatak's group, were noticed.

Having no one dared to protest against King Norodom Sihanouk's actions, the implementation of the compromise principle did not make much sense, and



activities have become a habit that was practiced and quietly accepted.

To an awareness of the eminent role of the late King Norodom Sihanouk in his leadership and his main concept of political philosophy, this research article will show how the late King Norodom Sihanouk conducted the past time for national unity and reconciliation which in turn led to further substantive learning from him as well.

Getting back to the problem of research, I found the previous one that no scholar researched this topic in terms of His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk was the most powerful monarch and charismatic leadership style not only among his own grassroots people but also for his foreign friends around the world such as De Gaulle, Nehru, Sukarno, Chou Enlai, Nasser, Mao Tse-Tung, Tito, Haile Selassie, Enver Hodja, Sekou Toure, Nikita Khrushchev, Boumediene, Nicolae Ceausescu. The legacy of King Father Norodom Sihanouk remains until nowadays is divided into two parts:

1. Physical legacy refers to infrastructural physical such as old buildings, the senate building along the road Norodom Blvd, Chaktomuk Theater Hall in front of the Royal Palace, and so on.

2. Mental legacy refers to common Cambodian people always commemorating their late King Father in terms of King Father Norodom Sihanouk as be great King in this age for all people around the country. Moreover, the King Father regarded him as the symbol of the national spirit unique. In doing so, he led the national reconciliation moving forward to national unity, including independence from France in 1953 and other significant achievements that he has well done for his nation. Therefore, people kept him in their minds forever.

His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk, the charismatic Cambodian leader whose remarkable skills of political adaptation personified the world the tiny, troubled kingdom where he was a towering figure for six decades, unfortunately, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk died peacefully early Monday in Beijing, China in 2012, and then he was 89. (BBC News, 2012).

It has also been noticed that King Norodom Sihanouk was born in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, on Oct. 31, 1922. A prince of the Norodom clan of the royal family, he was never considered a serious candidate to gain the throne. Instead, he was seen as a sensitive, if lonely, prince with a serious gift for music



and, later, a passion for film.

He received a first-rate French education, initially at a primary school in Phnom Penh and then at the Lycee Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon, the best in colonial Indochina. He was only 18 when King Monivong died in 1941 and the French colonial powers tapped him as the unlikely successor.

Looking back to the Khmer ancient time, the Khmer society always used the term “deva-raja” or “God-King”, and this term was derived from the Hindu concept of “god-king” or “king of the gods”, has various meanings in Sanskrit. In Hinduism, the king of gods is Indra, reflecting the celestial kingdom of gods. Southeast Asian kingdoms, such as Suvarnabhumi, have adopted Indian Sanskrit terms and Hindu-Buddhist concepts through Indianisation and Sanskrit language adoption. The concept of Devaraja evolved from the earlier Indian concept of “Cakravarti,” which refers to an ideal universal ruler. In Hinduism, the term denotes a powerful ruler, while in Buddhism, it refers to the counterpart of a Buddha (Coedès, 1968; Kulke, 1993).

Moreover, the Devaraja was the central concept of leadership style in the Khmer society in ancient time, showing that person who control the country was

God-King, based on observation, it can be seen that the Devaraja doctrine, which left the leader at the top, is now almost completely changed by the Devaraja doctrine due to the current regime changes that most countries in the world turned to democracy and still a small number still adhere to the dictatorial system of government.

The main idea of King Norodom Sihanouk involving the political concept, (Wickersham, 2019, pp. 119-129) has written in his article related to King Sihanouk’s political ideology that King Norodom Sihanouk could not be grasped apart from an understanding of Cambodian monarchic history. From its origins during the Classical Angkor Period (AD 802-1431), the Khmer kingship was an office infused with religious symbolism and its occupant was a divine figure. In 802, C.E. Jayavarman II became the first king of the Khmer Empire. Upon his coronation at the Mountain of Indra, King of the Gods, Jayavarman took the title “The God who is King.” (Coedès, 1968; Higham, 2001).

Fitting with his divine status, the kings of the Khmer Empire constructed enormous public works projects, including palaces and enormous temples, such as the iconic Angkor Wat. These Wats were



representations of the Mountain of Indra. In addition, the king was expected to distribute patronage in a pre-modern form of social welfare to the Khmer people, understood by the monarch to be his children.

There was no indication that Sihanouk understood the function and duties of the institution of kingship any differently than his predecessors. His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk, by all accounts, was a workaholic. He attended the opening of numerous hospitals, factories, and irrigation systems in Cambodia. In undertaking these projects, King Norodom Sihanouk ensured his legitimacy by carrying out one of the primary duties of kingship. There was no indication either that Sihanouk viewed the people any differently than the ancient kings of Angkor. He routinely referred to them in his addresses as "my children." He also showed no reticence in promoting a cult of personality about himself. He hated being isolated from his people, and early in his reign, the peasantry responded with the traditional displays of adoration characteristic of earlier times.

Significantly, King Norodom Sihanouk was regarded him as the charismatic Cambodian leader whose remarkable skills of political adaptation personified for the

world the tiny, troubled kingdom where he was a towering figure through six decades.

Also, King Norodom Sihanouk was regarded as an extremely dynamic king to deal with the problem of the nation with wisdom; in particular, he was a wise leader in Cambodia during the 1960s. Looking at the way of leadership, King Norodom Sihanouk used the Dharmic state in the state government affairs at that time, such as how to compromise among of grassroots people who asked for help from the King.

In addition, King Norodom Sihanouk abided by the rule of law, according to the Buddhist approach, for example, he has shown loving-kindness to general people while they need him. On the other hand, King Norodom Sihanouk was conducted to play a key role in the politics of the Kingdom of Cambodia, especially after the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed in 1979.

For the sake of Cambodia's nationality, King Norodom Sihanouk played a leading role in negotiating the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 (Findlay, 1995; Chandler, 1991). More than this, he was a symbol of the Kingdom of Cambodia until his death on October 15, 2012.

In his concept of political philosophy, King Norodom Sihanouk has created a



constitutional monarch following a Buddhist approach like the compromise, or non-violence manner to cope with the national issue and the way of leadership style, and His practice was based on ten virtues of leadership ideas such as generosity, morality.

Thus, the researcher sees the essence of the study of the concept of the applied political philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk. Therefore, the researcher is more interested in the topic “The Concept of the Political Philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk”.

## 2. Research Objectives

1. To study the concept of political Philosophy
2. To explore the political philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk
3. To analyze King Norodom Sihanouk's political philosophy

## 3. Methods

This research is documentary research, which emphasizes documents. Its research methodology can be divided into three stages as the following:

1. Collecting the materials from primary sources, Khmer Tipitaka, Cambodian institutions, Khmer Republic, Royal Government of Cambodia, texts/books, research, thesis,

papers, and other sources, in which all the information and data concerned with the main concept of the political philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk in terms of politic philosophy and Khmer Philosophy.

2. Analyzing the raw materials as well as systematizing them to give a clear scope and descriptive analysis of the topic in the concept of political philosophy.

3. Giving conclusions and suggestions for a further research study on the applied political philosophy, which can be beneficial for anyone interested in the academic field.

## 4. Results

After studying the Concept of the Political philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk, it can be seen that the character of this King is a Dharmic King, who puts the national interest of Cambodia above all. As a result of the study is the following:

The Concept of Political Philosophy, it was so-called state concepts that involved the whole meaning of political philosophy. Those concepts are catalysts of political philosophical considerable concepts in the state management, especially the most philosopher who accept that moral and political propositions have no factual or logical status. On the other hand,



the concepts of the political philosophy are become a significant mechanism to generate the concepts of political philosophy, extracted from ancient Greek such as the theories of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates.

The Concept of the Political Philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk is the concept of leadership of the state. Also, King Norodom Sihanouk, in which his leadership was based on the ten duties of leader and sublime states (Brahma Vihara Dharma), the political philosophy of the Buddha (Harris, 1999; Harris, 2008) The study has found that King Norodom Sihanouk uses two basic concepts of philosophy: the first concept, according to the principles of Buddhism, and the second concept, combined with Brahmanism concept, including the ancient Khmer system of beliefs on the soul. The concept of his political philosophy, King Norodom applied political philosophy in his practical leadership and he performed well until his people praised him as a great King or so-called the King of Dharma, which reflects that the practice of the ten duties of the leader and the four sublime states, and this leading style can be attractive of loving from the massive strongly support of the bottom of felt hearted people at

the nationwide as well.

An analyzing the Concept of the Political Philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk is found:

1. Reflexive approach, it is the most significant mechanism of his concept of political philosophy that can be learnt to apply in the present time, especially, the geopolitical catalyst in the region and the globe that allowing use method to avoiding from take side of superpowers are risen on.

2. Self-reliance, or so-called “independence-mastery” it is a strength of all nations in terms of this strategy will help oneself to be strong both economy, diplomatic, and also international relations that could be get rid of looking down from outside world.

3. Common interest, it is a core value of King Norodom Sihanouk could be learnt from him, according to this study found that King Norodom Sihanouk always thought of his nation, so that why he put the national interest is above all. On the other hand, this concept will lead moving forward to the national reconciliation in one nation, starting from the concept of common interest of nation. In terms of this concept, King Norodom Sihanouk always



becomes a political Guru of the nation, especially while Cambodia has its political deadlock, King Norodom Sihanouk was effective political arbitrary to all the political parties, especially after 1993 national election and also all circumstances of the nation. So, he was regarded that a Great King in the modern history of Cambodia.

4. The National economy, he took a combination of planning economy and liberalism, which fed the economy during his reign as a rich country until the export of agricultural products and creation. The motto is that Cambodia is an important rice barn in the world.

5. National education, during his reign, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk established many prestige universities left to the present day, for instance, the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and the Royal University of Law and Economics, which also trained many Cambodians to become highly qualified intellectuals at the national level and competition to other countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, so-called (ASEAN) at that time.

Although respecting the neutral policy and non-aligned movement of King Norodom Sihanouk, if looking at the practical knowledge from King Norodom Sihanouk,

that is, the flexibility in the geopolitical situation of the region and the world is very important strategy, such as the Buddha's philosophy on the none-soul concept as well.

In terms of practical results, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk applied his political philosophical thought, especially the basics of Buddhism. It was this feature that dared to advocate both on the international stage and at the regional level for the benefit of future generations forever, and that was known as the demand for full independence from France and the declaration of independence officially on November 9, 1953.

In the philosophical aspect of politics, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk fully adopted the concepts from the philosophy of Buddhism and Brahmanism. These two important inputs were incorporated into the implementation of national policies during his reign, especially from 1955 until 1970.

To achieve the concept of political leadership in the state's affairs, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk, focused on two principles that combine the theories of religious philosophy, including Buddhism, Brahmanism, and the ancient Khmer philosophical concept, such as Totemic belief into one driving force of his aspiration to apply his political philosophical concept



in the management of state affairs both internal and external perspectives.

What is the common idea that he took from these two major religions to merge is that Brahmanism has a philosophy focused on monotheism, which means that only Brahma can save people. Buddhism, on the other hand, came to Cambodia after Brahmanism, a religion that focused on the Noble Eight-Fold Path and also for the king or leaders are based on the ten virtues of the King, and those ten virtues are namely: generosity, high moral character, self-sacrifice, integrity, kindness, gentleness, self-control, non-fury, non-oppress, tolerance, and also non-opposition.

Based on the History of Cambodia, it is also revealed that Jayavarman VII is the royal model in conformity to the leadership style. During his reign was strong and able to expand its considerable territory in terms of Jayavarman VII integrated philosophical concepts from these two religions, leading the country will become to the strongest nation at that time in this Southeast Asian region.

As a result, King Norodom Sihanouk gained great popularity among the grassroots people of Cambodia. On the other hand, His Majesty was a high ordination as a Bhikkhu for three months in 1947 (Jeldres, 2003).

So, it shows that King Norodom Sihanouk is a profound Buddha's teaching practitioner in the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia.

Although former King Norodom Sihanouk has passed away from Cambodia, Cambodians still remember his last words in 2011 in front of the Royal Palace when he urged all Cambodians to "unite for the nation " in One Khmer Society.

King Norodom Sihanouk famously built strong personal connections with regional leaders, including former Indonesian president Sukarno, Jawaharlal Nehru, former prime minister of India, and former Chinese premier Zhou Enlai. At present, no Cambodian politicians have taken the lead over the Concept of Political Philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk in both local and international stages.

## 5. Discussion

King Norodom Sihanouk, a 20th-century political figure, was revered for his efforts to gain independence and maintain neutrality during the Vietnam War. He was seen as a unifying figure, bringing stability to Cambodia. However, criticisms arose during the Khmer Rouge regime, arguing that his leadership contributed to their rise. Despite being a playboy and musician, Sihanouk was a strong-willed and influential



figure in Cambodia's political history. After King Monivong's death in 1941, his personality changed significantly, and he became involved in various activities, including horse riding, cinema, and theater.

In 1945, the Japanese coup declared independence in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. King Norodom Sihanouk, a controversial figure, led Cambodia's independence in 1953 and marginalized the communist movement. After abdicating in 1966, he focused on transforming the country into a modern state, supporting education and health services. He faced resistance from neighbors and suspicion from the US for his "neutral" foreign policy. In the 1960s, he appeased Hanoi by turning back on American aid and allowing Vietnamese communist forces to use Cambodian territory.

In this regard, King Norodom Sihanouk's rule weakened due to conservative politicians' dissatisfaction with his policies. In 1970, his former allies overthrew him and his regime. King Norodom Sihanouk joined the Cambodian communist movement to fight the Lon Nol regime, but was denied any role in Cambodia. In 1993, he was instated but was unable to play a significant role in Cambodia's political affairs.

## 6. Suggestions

From the study of the Concept of the Political Philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk, it can be observed that from ancient times up to the present times, the concept of philosophers in the world past to present are still important and can be applied in daily life, especially, in leadership for each national and country institution that requires a clear philosophical thought to orient towards success. As for Concept of Political Philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk, found that King used the applied political philosophy extracted from Buddhist and Brahman theories to integrate into one. His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk always practiced the ten duties of the King, are consist of Generosity, High moral character, Self-sacrifice, Integrity, Kindness and Gentleness, Self-Control, Non- fury, Non-oppress, Tolerance, and Non-Opposition to get more popular among the people who are living under his patronage until regarding as Dharmica Raja (Righteous King), referring to the King with Dharma in practical perspectives.

There are some questions that should be further researched for next generation scholars as follows:



1. There should be further research on how and why His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk fell from his reign during the 70s.

2. During His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk's pose as the Head of State, he always raised "Neutralism" instead of "Neutrality", but in a practical manner on politics showing his government in favor of the communist bloc rather than the democratic /liberal bloc and look seems to be put far away from neutralism theory by his declaration in the national political platform.

3. Regarding the treatment of other opponents in domestic politics during his leadership, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk applied to silence them, especially politicians who opposed his applied political concept. In this way, King Norodom Sihanouk regarded the same binary distinction between "Sihanouk loyalists" and "foreign

traitors" to any opposition politician in Cambodia at that time. So, next researchers could find out to reveal more details about what is behind the scene of his applied political philosophy concepts.

### 7. Knowledge Assets

After research of the concept of political philosophy of King Norodom Sihanouk, gained more new knowledge that can be able to apply in real case, especially about his political and philosophical thoughts, particularly in reconciling national conflicts and practicing foreign affairs to avoid falling down the country.

This knowledge demonstrates both a mean-approach and an end-approach, particularly during the rise of geo-politics in the world. It can be summarized into ways as followings



Figure 1 New knowledge



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