How then does Hun Sen differ from his predecessors? How is he similar? What kind of national leader does Hun Sen wish to be in the eyes of his citizens?

Clearly, he cannot expect the popular, subject-to-ruler veneration that Sihanouk continues to enjoy. Even after two decades of social upheaval, royalist nationalism remains a force in Cambodia especially among the older generations. Cambodia's strong tradition of oral history means that veneration of royalty is passed on to the younger generations. Hun Sen clearly recognises the significance of royalist nationalism and has pursued every opportunity to align himself with Sihanouk. So far, he is in a good position to gain from Sihanouk's popularity.

For many years Hun Sen depended on the Communist Party and his administration for political support. Now, however, he has distanced himself from the party which has lately come under the unchallenged control of conservative Chea Sim. Student protests in Phnom Penh have revealed the startling dissipation of the Phnom Penh administration. State assets have been entirely sold off to private interests by renegade bureaucrats. Yet Hun Sen's inaction in the face of these events indicates serious shortcomings in his political authority. His popular credibility has also been harmed by evidence of corruption within his own family network.

With recent institution of the Supreme National Council (SNC) as the peak ruling body in Cambodia, representatives from each faction—and therefore of each past tradition of Cambodian nationalism—are in Phnom Penh vying for their share of political influence. Hun Sen, while positioned carefully by Sihanouk's side, is forced to deal with the current political malaise from the position of a politician with a rapidly dissolving support base.

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