

Exiled in L.A.

The man who wouldn't be king

BY MICHAEL CAPE and KYRA DUPONT

Amid L.A.'s obsession with celebrity, you sort of wonder what is going to happen when a normal-looking middle-aged prince arrives at the airport for a heroic rescue with his supporters. Not much, it seems.

The problem is that no one can readily spot, among the folks coming out of customs, Prince Norodom Sirivudh, Cambodia's former foreign minister and the younger half brother of that country's King Norodom Sihanouk. Still, his supporters are eager to spot him and announce his impending return to Cambodia, which would end a three-year exile.

Srivudh has spent much of that period in Southern California because an estimated 50,000 Khmer-Americans reside in Long Beach — and because his cousin owns a home in Fontana. His arrival on this occasion is part of a "victory" lap around the globe to thank supporters among the Cambodian diaspora who have buoyed him in exile.

The 47-year-old Sirivudh appears, carting his own bags. He looks, in appearance and manner, a lot like everyone else coming off the flight from France — an image that doesn't escape Anna, 30, a Cambodian-American in search of her first prince sighting. Upon seeing his simple dark suit and round, jovial face — dominant genetic trait among the royal bloodline — she is doubtful.

"Is that him, the short one? He's short, very short," she says. "I wouldn't have known he was a prince."

But Sirivudh is every inch a prince, although one of more common sensibilities.

Despite being the son of Norodom Suramarith, Cambodia's ceremonial monarch of the late 1950s, and spending much of his early childhood in the hands of

servants within the burnt-yellow walls of Phnom Penh's illustrious Royal Palace, Sirivudh has commoner's roots.

"My grandfather was broke," Sirivudh says. "My mother reached the palace when she met my father. My mother often showed me our family's village. It is a poor village. So I was always conscious of the two worlds."

Following a 1970 U.S.-backed right-wing coup that removed King Sihanouk and most politically active royalists from the government, Sirivudh's family fled to France, where he studied banking, washed dishes at night and joined a far-leftist labor party. "In France, in the '70s, we had nothing. We sold my mother's jewels to have a shelter."

At home the situation was worse. From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime was blamed for an estimated 1.7 million deaths. But by the early 1990s a new era seemed to be dawning, and Sirivudh and his Royalist Party grabbed a surprise 1993 election victory over military-backed rulers who had overthrown the Khmer Rouge.

Those were heady days for Sirivudh, who gained the support of hopeful Cambodians with his leftist political idealism, democratic rhetoric and courage to criticize superiors openly — a rarity in Cambodian politics. Back then, he was also known for his piano playing, generosity and partying. But the popular foreign minister and his party never achieved a controlling share of power.

And in 1995, Prime Minister Hun Sen — who once bragged of sidelining four princes from politics in four years — surrounded the prince's house with tanks and threatened to jail him in a grim colonial-era prison, on the pretext that Sirivudh had plotted to kill him. The prince fled to France.

Hun Sen only consented to Sirivudh's return last month as part of an overarching political solution to the nation's intractable economic problems and political turbulence, which set the stage for the prince's early winter stop in Los Angeles.



Plain-clothed prince: A sighting at LAX

...the newspaper is in a financial straits... The paper is in a financial straits... The paper is in a financial straits...

Singleton repeats in Ontario what he did in Long Beach, it could spell trouble for reporters, readers and revenues, said Mel... "If that's the way he runs a newspaper," said Bray, referring to Singleton's reputation, "we can't wait to get down to it."

...If Singleton repeats in Ontario what he did in Long Beach, it could spell trouble for reporters, readers and revenues, said Mel

...the newspaper is in a financial straits... The paper is in a financial straits... The paper is in a financial straits...

One would think the Daily Bulletin may now produce more income as a result of the larger, combined ad base... "But will the newsroom see any of it? Or will it go into Singleton's pocket? I don't think anything is a foregone conclusion."

...One would think the Daily Bulletin may now produce more income as a result of the larger, combined ad base... "But will the newsroom see any of it? Or will it go into Singleton's pocket? I don't think anything is a foregone conclusion."

It is only when the prince reaches the exit, where he is warmly welcomed by forewarned "Sirivudhists" dressed to the gills, and filmed for TV, that anyone notices his supposedly regal presence. A passer-by asks about the ruckus. "A Cambodian prince? Wow!" she says.

Anna still looks skeptical. She seems to be thinking, "A man like that could never be a king." Sirivudh says he feels the same way, adding that he doesn't even want to be king, preferring the role of royalist politician.

But if he is to be a prince, he says, "I want to be the prince of a kingdom up to the stature of its [Buddhist] temples."

To Sirivudh, that means a commitment to social issues and a stated desire to transform Cambodia into a democracy where politicians battle poverty, not each other. His supporters see something grander in him than in other relatives of King Sihanouk, who have distinguished themselves for being corrupt, out of touch or just plain stupid.

Sirivudh has neither bodyguards, entourage nor, apparently, solid personal financial resources. Instead he relies on charm, wit and the generosity of supporters, both to get by and to remain relevant.

Following his arrival at LAX, Sirivudh gives a well-honed political pep talk to some 30 supporters, sparking their Americanized imaginations with visions of a rule of law and commercial development that would transform Cambodia — and also restore that country as the Southeast Asian oasis of peace it was early on in the American war in Vietnam. He also makes a joking reference to the disproportionate number of Cambodians in the doughnut industry, suggesting that they take their sugary goods back to the homeland. "Doughnuts in the year 1999 and 2000," he quips to widespread laughter.

Sirivudh's reputation for integrity is widely affirmed by supporters. He never

believed in corruption," his cousin Malika says. "It is one thing he has never needed to worry about, because everything has been provided for him... You don't need to buy people [if] you are already a prince."

Indeed, supporters eagerly press cash and plane tickets into his hands in the name of the good fight.

"Most people give him money directly, 100 or 200 dollars, depending on the depth of their support. They trust him so much," explains Donut King owner Sahak Vaun, president of the Southern California branch of the Royalist Party. "He needs support from us, and we support him 100 percent."

A recent Long Beach fund-raiser for the prince and royalist political activism brought out more than 300 supporters and raised thousands of dollars. Even a visit to downtown L.A.'s main Buddhist temple, where monks are not supposed to have physical contact with currency, scored him a lucrative unmarked envelope — hardly a rarity, according to royalists in L.A.

But the only meaningful prize, Sirivudh insists, is across the ocean.

"My exile," he sums up, "I don't like it. It is a terrible suffering."

Upon his return to Cambodia, says Sirivudh, he'll avoid a direct political role — something likely to please strongman Hun Sen. The prince also asserts, however, that he'll work in any way he can for social justice. His supporters would like him to seize the royalist helm from his poorly regarded half brother, Prince Norodom Ranariddh.

His homecoming will not be without dangers, given his country's bloody history and the fact that Hun Sen holds all the best cards — the courts, the money and the guns.

"It is still Cambodia," Sirivudh acknowledges. "As long as there is no reform of the army, there is still a fear that someone will shoot at someone. There is always fear. You must believe in a cause. But I know the end result will remain the same."

see to believe!

Slipcovered chairs \$398 SALE PRICED

contemporary sofa Many Designer Fabrics Available \$489

15% OFF

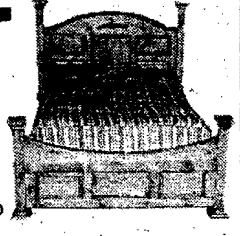
Slipcovered or Upholstered Exclusively at AI's Discount

The Jillian Sofa



KISSING BED reg. '999 SALE \$449 (queen)

W/THIS AD, INCLUDES HEADBOARD, FOOTBOARD AND WOODEN RAILS



Pine furniture by Ashley

Table \$249 Armchair \$79 Sidechair \$69

5 PC. FARMHOUSE DINING SET

Table & Chair \$128 (Reg. \$250) Fine & White

CHOICE OF FABRICS LIFETIME GUARANTEE ON FRAMES



AI's Discount Futons

New Mission Oak Futon \$189

Futon Mattress Included Oak arms; metal body. Easily converts to full size bed.

WHERE THE TECHNOLOGY MEETS THE CRAFTSMANSHIP

Black Metal Bi-fold Futon From \$127

Includes Deluxe Futon Mattress Reg. Price \$299

Huge Selection of Futon



AI'S DISCOUNT

WEST LOS ANGELES 2234 Sepulveda (Between Olympic & Pico) 310 444-1470

WOODLAND HILLS 2203 (1 Mile East of Hollywood) 818

DISCOUNT PRICES - DISCOUNT PRICES

AI TO REST... CA... BEAUT ANNIV... CONT PILL... DE POCKE... TIL PILI... ULTRA PILL