

Communists Forging Gentle Laotians Into More

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Dec. 11— With a blend of moderate methods but revolutionary goals, the new Communist rulers of Laos have begun transforming the gentle people of this nation into a more regimented, spartan society.

In the process, they seem to be adapting to Laotian purposes many practices of Vietnamese Communism.

Unlike what happened in Cambodia, or even South Vietnam, the Pathet Lao's take-over here has been accomplished with almost no violence—most opponents simply fled across the Mekong River to Thailand. And the Communists seem to have generated real enthusiasm in some young people through their appeal to Laotian nationalism.

But at the same time, the Communists' intensive use of so-called re-education seminars and tight political controls has created deep anxiety. Many Laotians are now afraid to talk openly in front of their own children.

Monarchy Abolition

The abolition on Dec. 3 of the coalition Government and the six-century-old monarchy—which were replaced by a People's Democratic Republic of Laos—is a good example of the Communists' tactics.

Until a month ago, the Pathet Lao had repeatedly pledged to respect the monarchy and the coalition Government, neither of which posed any threat to the Communist-led organization. The King, Savang Vatthana, was powerless, and since the Pathet Lao's seizure of power in Vientiane last May, it had totally dominated the coalition administration, established under provisions of the Vientiane peace agreement of 1973.

But suddenly, popular demonstrations were organized and a group described as a people's supreme assembly, meeting in secret in the gymnasium of the former American school here, declared the coalition dissolved and the monarchy ended. Soon after, the King and his cousin, the former Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma, were named as "advisers" to the new Government.



The New York Times/Fox Butterfield

A Buddhist monk waters a vegetable garden. Gardens have been planted all over Vientiane as the Pathet Lao tries to encourage self-reliance and hard work.

There was no public protest in Vientiane, which had never fully recognized the King, since he headed what had been the kingdom of Luang Prabang. But an elderly peasant in a village near Vientiane registered quiet disapproval.

"Since my head was that small," he said, holding up a clenched fist, "I never heard of a king abdicating."

Among the Pathet Lao's other actions to reshape this

country of three million people are the following :

¶ Almost everyone from peasant to Cabinet minister has been required to attend lengthy re-education classes, with heavy doses of manual labor for former opponents of the present ruling group. None of the senior army officers, policemen or bureaucrats who have been sent to remote camps for their classes are known to have come back.

¶ The press has been reduced to two Government papers, patterned on Hanoi's. Propaganda posters showing smiling peasants have made their appearance in Vientiane, and Western dress, songs and dances have been forbidden as "reactionary."

¶ Even the Pathet Lao front organization, the Neo Lao Hak Kat, or Lao Patriotic Front, which for years was the only entity presented to the public, has been replaced by the secretive Lao People's Revolutionary Party, or Phak Pasason Pativat Lao. Until the Government press and radio began mentioning it this fall, information about it was so scanty that specialists were uncertain of its exact name.

The term Pathet Lao itself means only Lao Nation and is not used by the Laotian Communists though it has commonly been employed in the West.

Along with the emergence of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, its two top leaders, who had not been seen in public here since the late 1950's, appeared at a diplomatic reception last week. They are Kaysone Phomvihane, the new Prime Minister and secretary general of the party, and Neuhak Phoumsavan, the new senior Deputy Prime Minister.

Both have close ties to North Vietnam. Mr. Kaysone Phomvihane a heavy set, stolid-looking man about 55 years old, is half Vietnamese and was educated in Hanoi. Mr. Neuhak Phoumsavan, like Prince Souphanouvong, the titular President of the new Government, is married to a Vietnamese woman who is reportedly a Communist. In 1954 he accompanied the Vietminh delegation to the Geneva peace conference in Indochina.

The new Cabinet named by the Communists is largely a copy the old Pathet Lao administration, which was com-

posed of men who have worked together for years. No women or members of the former Vientiane coalition Government were included, although three former members of that regime were named to the large People's Supreme Assembly, whose powers remain to be seen.

The speed and finesse with which the Pathet Lao has acted have startled some non-American diplomats here who had long talked of a "Lao factor"—a Laotian tendency toward casualness and tolerance—that would somehow make the Pathet Lao different from the other Indochinese Communists.

Some differences do remain. Foreign hippies still wander Vientiane's dusty, sunbaked streets, along with youthful Pathet Lao soldiers in oversize green uniforms carrying AK-47 rifles. And the American Embassy, though much reduced in size, is still here, the only United States diplomatic mission left in Indochina.

Program For Young People

The Communists' program for mobilizing young people also appears to be a subtle technique of their own devising. Large numbers of boys and girls in Vientiane have volunteered to join the Pathet Lao's Lao Patriotic Youth Association where they get hours of practice in patriotic songs and dances and learn to grow vegetables.

Vegetable gardens have suddenly been planted all over Vientiane as the Pathet Lao has tried to encourage self-reliance and hard work.

"We ourselves wanted to grow vegetables, but the old Government wouldn't let us," said a 25-year-old Buddhist monk who has been attending re-education classes.

The monk said he wanted to follow the Communists' suggestion that he go to the countryside as a teacher to help the peasants. The monk, an earnest-looking man wearing a saffron robe, had pasted a new Pathet Lao red, blue and white flag on his door.

In an action program proposed last week by Mr. Kaysone Phomvihane, the new Prime Minister, the Communists pledged "to give freedom to Buddhist monks." But they also called for abolition of "backward customs and traditions that jeopardize production."

In addition, the program calls for enforcing a "popular democratic dictatorship" and building up "the people's security forces." Laos's small farms are to be gradually collectivized and the country's few businesses nationalized, "in order to abolish all economic bases of the comprador bourgeoisie, particularly those of the currently active bureaucrats, warlords and reactionaries serving as stooges of the U.S. imperialists."

In one of its most ambitious passages, the program commits the Pathet Lao to resettling the country's Lao hill tribes in fixed areas. The tribal people, who make up about half of Laos's population, follow a seminomadic way of life by periodically burning off forest cover to plant their crops.

According to some reports, the fierce Meo tribespeople, who formed the bulk of the secret army financed by the American Central Intelligence Agency, have continued to resist the Communists and occasionally still ambush Pathet Lao patrols.

It is difficult to gauge the

accuracy of these stories, or other reports about conditions in Laos's mountainous, remote countryside, for all Westerners except Russians are restricted to Vientiane. About 500 Russians, many living in houses once occupied by Americans, run an air service for the Pathet Lao.

Whatever the situation in the countryside, many residents have fled from Vientiane, including most of the country's few doctors and lawyers and many small shopkeepers.

Many of those leaving were people associated with the old regime or the relatively prosperous who recognized that their standard of living would inevitably fall with the end of the American aid that long financed Vientiane's consumer goods. But ordinary people have been hurt too by the economic changes that have come in the wake of the Pathet Lao take-over.

Prices have at least doubled in the last month because the border with Thailand has been shut, first by the Pathet Lao and then, on Nov. 17, by the Thais after a Communist attack on a Thai patrol boat on the Mekong River. Items ranging from flour and tomatoes to beer and ice cream have disappeared entirely, and gasoline has soared to the equivalent of \$10 a gallon.

The Pathet Lao has blamed Bangkok for the border troubles, but some diplomats here suspect that the Communists themselves engineered the Mekong incident to give them a convenient way to begin weaning Vientiane away from its artificially high standard of living and its dependence on Thailand.