

Laos' Communists Method

By H.D.S. Greenway

Washington Post Foreign Service

VIENTIANE—With the People's Democratic Republic of Laos more than a week old, portraits of the former king are slowly being taken down from the walls of public buildings and the royal symbol of the three-headed elephant under a white parasol is being covered or obliterated.

There seems to be no great hurry. Laos, the last of the former French colonies of Indochina to go Communist, is going about its social revolution at its own pace.

The monarchy and the coalition government that ruled here were abolished Dec. 2, but, the Communists have been in actual charge here since spring. A complete Communist takeover was inevitable, although some people were surprised that it came so soon. With virtually no resistance, diplomats say, the Communist leaders saw no point in postponing it.

Unlike neighboring Thailand, the king here never played a major role in the politics and emotions of most Laotians. His kingdom, the former kingdom of Luang Prabang, was only one of several rival kingdoms and royal families in what is now Laos. The French made him king of all Laos only 30 years ago.

Nonetheless, his abdication has caused uneasiness here because it is a sign that the Communists mean to accelerate the pace of social revolution. Thousands of Vientiane residents have fled across the river into Thailand. Many shops in the center of town have been closed and abandoned.

Most residents seem willing to go along with whatever comes, however. To many the integrity, nationalistic spirit and end to corruption brought by the Communists represent a refreshing change from the old, decadent Vientiane in

which nearly everyone appeared to be on the take.

The Communists are much better organized than the old Lao government ever was, and their efficiency has amazed old Indochina hands. Their mass rallies, political indoctrination and local elections are similar to those organized by the Vietnamese, according to reporters here who witnessed the Communist takeover in Saigon.

One recent morning before dawn the sound of drums in the streets turned people out of their houses for a 7 a.m. rally. Nearly 40,000 people in the sports stadium responded to cheers, chants and songs while waving revolutionary posters and the new national flag. Some were enthusiastic, while others seemed baffled. Pathet Lao soldiers in pressed khakis mingled with civilians, some of whom still wore U.S. army patches sewn onto their coats and American college sweatshirts.

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Monarchy

Communist propaganda puts great emphasis on how Laos was exploited by foreigners. The Americans are always singled out for particular blame, yet individual Americans here are not even frowned at by the normally polite Laotians one meets in the street.

There are still many foreigners in town. A colony of hippies, who have always liked Laos for its easy-going ways and open marijuana market, are stranded here because the Thais have closed the land frontier over a shooting incident.

Surprisingly, there are still bars open in town where foreigners can pick up girls, sex-show nightclubs although sex-show nightclubs have been shut down.

Beefy Russians have replaced Americans as the most noticeable foreigners here, and more seem to arrive every day. They are, at the moment, operating an air service around the country. They, too, are seen with Lao bar girls around town and, if

possible, they seem to drink even more than the Americans used to.

Vientiane bears about as much relation to the rest of Laos as Georgetown does to rural West Virginia. But foreign reporters are not allowed outside the Vientiane district and it is not possible to say how well things are going in the rest of the country. There are rumors, nothing more, of trouble in Southern Laos. The government has admitted armed clashes with Meo tribesmen who were armed and recruited by the CIA during the war.

There are rural villages within the Vientiane district, however. In one of them, a peasant farmer whom I have known personally for eight years gave an insight to how the revolution might be going in the rest of the country.

He said the Communists had restricted movement to a



By John Burgess—The Washington Post

Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong, left, and neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma chat in April 1974.

great extent, so it is necessary to get permission to travel any distance. He had to inform the authorities even when he went out to his fields.

But, he said, there was very little stealing anymore and people were grateful both for law and order and, of course, for the end to the fighting.

In the countryside the Communists appear to put less emphasis on ideology in their political seminars than they do in town. The old peasant had only a vague idea of why Lao was at war for so long. Although he now knew the word "reactionar," he had only a marginal idea of what it meant. Instead, the emphasis in his village appeared to be on self-reliance, hard work and cooperation, as well as community spirit.

He said he was happy with the change. The new rulers are bringing back the old village values of his youth, when everyone helped each other at harvest time.

He clearly did not approve of the abdication of the king, but he was reluctant to discuss it.

If there is suffering and hardship now in this capital it is because the Thais closed the border three weeks ago. Almost all the goods destined for Vientiane, including some of its food, come across the Mekong River from Thailand.

The price of eggs in the market has doubled and the price of gasoline has increased tenfold. The Vietnamese are flying in some foodstuffs in captured American planes, and a truck



By John Everingham—The Washington Post

A mixed group of Pathet Lao irregulars, Laotian government soldiers and local villagers posed together in 1973, before

the cease-fire, in a government village south of Luang Prabang, the royal capital.

convoy of gasoline is expected from Vietnam.

The Thais appear to be trying to teach the Laotians a lesson. But, in fact, they appear to be playing into the hands of the new Communist leaders, who put ideology ahead of economics. The

Communist leaders may be delighted to wean Vientiane residents away from their dependence on consumer goods without having to take the blame for it.

In the meantime, there are abandoned cars around town and traffic has dwindled to the

mid-1960s state when there were hardly any traffic lights in Vientiane. There are so few cars now that the authorities have said it is all right to go through red lights as long as you are careful.

Everywhere in Vientiane people are encouraged to grow

small vegetable gardens, a practice that began before the Thais closed the border. The old signboard that once marked the office of the Overseas Investors Service now serves as a fence to protect a little garden in a side street.