

SIHANOUK REPORTED OUT IN A COUP BY HIS PREMIER; CAMBODIA AIRPORTS SHUT



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Soviet Premier Aleksei N. Kosygin bidding good-by to Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodian Chief of State, who ended a four-day visit to Moscow and was on way to Peking.

PRINCE IS ABROAD

19 MARCH

Leaving Moscow For Peking, He Hints at an Exile Regime

By HENRY KAMM

Special to The New York Times

BANGKOK, Thailand, March 18—Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Chief of State of Cambodia, was overthrown today in his absence, the Pnompenh radio announced.

Power has apparently been

seized by Lieut. Gen. Lon Nol, the Premier and Defense Minister, and the First Deputy Premier, Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, a cousin of Prince Sihanouk.

Cheng Heng, President of the National Assembly, has been designated as interim Chief of State, pending elections, the radio announced. Informed Pnompenh sources consider him a figure of negligible political stature.

Sihanouk Sought Balance

When the announcement of his overthrow was made Prince Sihanouk, who is 47, was in Moscow where he had arrived from Paris five days ago, and was preparing to depart for Peking.

[Prince Sihanouk left Moscow for Peking Wednesday several hours after he had been toppled as Cambodia's leader. The Prince acted as if he were still Chief of State but spoke of the possibility of forming a government in exile.]

The announcement came after a week of anti-Communist rioting, reportedly officially inspired, in which the embassies of North Vietnam and the Vietcong were sacked. These events moved Cambodia close to open

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hostility with the Vietnamese Communists, who are operating in large number on the Cambodian side of the long frontier with South Vietnam.

Last Friday, the Cambodian government asked North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops to leave the country by dawn Sunday. Meetings on the demand have been held subsequently in Pnompenh, but no progress has been reported.

Prince Sihanouk, a neutralist whose policies swerved often between right and left in an effort to strike a balance, is known to have struggled for a year against the hard anti-Communist position of General Lon Nol and Prince Sirik Matak.

According to informed sources, that struggle precipitated Prince Sihanouk's downfall, but was not its principal cause.

What brought him down, the sources said, was his cult of personality, his expensive striving for grandeur, the stagnation of Cambodia's economy, the corruption of leading personalities and the bureaucracy

and widespread smuggling and trading in contraband goods.

No reports of violence attendant on today's events have reached the outside world. Cambodia is cut off except for the broadcasts, which are being received here imperfectly, on powerful monitoring equipment. Cable and telephone connections are not functioning.

Airports Closed

Cambodia's two commercial airports, Pnompenh and Siemreap, were closed to all traffic shortly after noon today without prior warning. The war in South Vietnam and Laos, and political strains with Cambodia's other neighbor, Thailand, have effectively cut off access to Cambodia by road.

Neighboring countries learned of the events in Pnompenh from a French-language broadcast that said:

"Following the political crisis provoked by Prince Norodom Sihanouk in the past days, the National Assembly and the Royal Council in joint session, in accordance with the constitution of the Kingdom, unanimously withdrew their confidence from Prince Norodom

Sihanouk. From this day, 18 March 1970 at 1300 hours [1 A. M. Wednesday, New York time], Prince Norodom Sihanouk ceases to be the Chief of State of Cambodia and will be replaced by Cheng Heng, the President of the National Assembly, who will assume the function of the Chief of State until the election of a new Chief of State in accordance with the text of the nation's Constitution"

Prince Sihanouk had left Pnompenh on Jan. 6 for the announced purpose of taking a cure in Grasse, France, for obesity and a blood disorder. He set out on the return journey, with scheduled stops in Moscow and Peking, after the rioting broke out.

The first indication of events more serious than the rioting and the challenge last Friday by Cambodia to the Vietnamese Communists to withdraw their troops came today with the sudden closing of Pnompenh Airport.

A Union of Burma Airways commercial flight left here for Pnompenh at 11:30 A.M. after receiving clearance for the 50-minute flight from the Saigon Control Tower, which directs

traffic for the Cambodian capital. On board, the stewardess could be heard to announce that the landing was imminent. But then the pilot's voice came over the public-address system to announce that Pnompenh Airport was closed and he was turning the jet back toward Bangkok.

No reason was given, the pilot said. The mystery persisted until shortly before 3 P.M. The Pnompenh station then came on the air to announce that a Cambodian Government communique was being read to a special session of the National Assembly.

In the statement, the Government accused the Vietnamese Communists of spreading false rumors, bribing Cambodian officials and distributing anti-Government leaflets, all in an effort to set Cambodians against Cambodians.

In view of this, and for reasons that were not stated, the Government announced that it was relieving the Pnompenh police chief of his functions and would take "extreme measures" to restore calm.

Although the Pnompenh radio usually goes off the air at 3 o'clock, it stayed on after the announcement, broadcasting light music.

The announcement, although indicating that serious events were in progress, did not cause analysts here to suspect that a move against Prince Sihanouk was in preparation. No accusation, not even implicitly, was addressed to him.

Music Interrupted

At 5:07 P.M., the music was interrupted for the communiqué containing the decisive announcement of Prince Sihanouk's overthrow.

Prince Sihanouk abdicated the throne of Cambodia in 1955, because, he said, the monarch was the prisoner of a rigid system and could not serve his people as effectively as he wished. He became Chief of State.

His father, King Norodom Suramarit, succeeded him. Since his death in 1960, his wife, Queen Kossamak Nearieath, has represented the monarchy while the throne remains vacant.

Mr. Cheng Heng went on the air after Prince Sihanouk's ouster was announced to declare his acceptance of the title of Acting Chief of State.

He was elected President of the National Assembly in 1968 and re-elected last year. He is a wealthy lawyer and former Agriculture Minister. No date has been announced for the election of a new Chief of State.

Sihanouk Shifted to Right

In the view of the sources recently in Pnompenh Prince Sihanouk in his last year as Chief of State had shown a pronounced shift to the right toward the position of his pronouncements against the Communists and had noticeably diminished his tendency to balance anti-Communist statements with strident attacks on "American imperialism."

Nevertheless, the increasing pressure of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong largely because of their increasing need

to find sanctuary in territory safer from American firepower than South Vietnam, heightened the political struggle in Cambodia by causing discontent with Prince Sihanouk's policies within the military, the sources said.

The soldiers were described as exasperated by apparent differences in the Chief of State's words and his actions. They charged that though the Prince condemned the Vietnamese Communists as the enemy in speeches, he forced the Cambodian military to release all Vietcong they captured.

They saw a contradiction between his complaints that the Vietcong were deriving much of their food through illegal purchases from Cambodian farmers and his recognition last year of the Vietcong's so-called provisional revolutionary government and his subsequent signing of a trade agreement with it.

The military were said to resent what they considered Prince Sihanouk's ambiguous policy of ordering the armed forces to intervene against American attacks on Vietnamese communist military targets on Cambodian soil. Cambodian gunfire was reported to have brought down an American fighter-bomber attacking a Vietnamese anti-aircraft position in Cambodia last November. The result was a heavy American attack on the Cambodian installation that killed 27 Cambodians.

These sentiments were said to have contributed to turning General Lon Nol from a loyal follower of the Prince into a determined opponent. The general's control of the small military forces—about 35,000 in a nation of 7 million—is said to be complete.

Opposition of Cousin

Prince Sirik Matak's opposition was said to have been rooted more in his dis-

approval of what he considered his cousin's flamboyant megalomania, Prince Sihanouk's insistence on nationalization of Cambodia's few industries, wastefulness in the use of limited investment capital and tolerance of widespread corruption.

Prince Sirik Matak, according to the sources, was leader of a body of opinion that believed that Prince Sihanouk was condemning Cambodia to economic disaster by ill-planned investments. Among these were his plan to build a port city named after himself — Sihanoukville — in which less than one ship a day docked in 1969, as well as plants for the manufacture of tires, jute sacks, textiles and distilleries that produced no revenues for the state but were said to enrich those whom Prince Sihanouk named as directors.

Other investments cited were large hotels in places that do not need them; state-run nightclubs with taxi-dancers, and two movie houses, one for the international film festivals in which the Prince's own productions have on both occasions won the first prize, and one for the showing of the Prince's films to the public.

Prince Sirik Matak and Gen-

eral Lon Nol were reported to have agreed by last summer that the only way to return Cambodia to order was to limit the Chief of State's exercise of power. The issue was at the center of the 27th Congress last June of the Sangkum, the political movement founded by Prince Sihanouk to group all political factions under one organization, with himself on top.

When subsequently former Premier Pen Nouth stepped down because of long illness and General Lon Nol was asked by the Chief of State to form a cabinet, the general replied that he would form a government only as Premier and not as merely a secretary to Prince Sihanouk.

A special congress was named by Prince Sihanouk and instructed to form a government. General Lon Nol, the overwhelming choice, rejected the office at first and accepted only after the Chief of State met his conditions.

They were, principally, that he would have the right to choose his ministers and that they would report to him, not to Prince Sihanouk.

The Chief of State accepted and the Cabinet took office last Aug. 12. This acceptance by Prince Sihanouk of a government with powers not dependent on his whims was considered by some observers a bloodless coup. The Premier and Prince Sirik Matak issued decrees in the early days of their government to solidify this "coup."

Tax Payments Rerouted

The Premier ordered all Government communications and letters to be addressed to the Premier's office rather than to the Chief of State. The deputy Premier, who made the country's economy his special field, ended the practice of having certain taxes, such as those on the motorcycles and scooters, paid into the Chief of State's treasury rather than the Government's.

During the 28th Congress of the Sangkum, in the last days of last year, Prince Sirik Matak weakened the Chief of State's position by forcing the closing of the Pnompenh Casino over Prince Sihanouk's opposition. A few days later, Prince Sihanouk, reportedly under heavy pressure, left for France, with

Prince Sirik Matak, in all but in name, in charge of Cambodia.

Last month, General Lon Nol, who had been in France, returned, and open measures against the Vietnamese Communists in Cambodia followed.

The sources said that one of the most significant anti-Communist moves was cooperation between the South Vietnamese and Cambodian armed forces in fighting the Vietcong in the border areas. This is effected, according to the sources, by Cambodian officers' intentionally discussing on "insecure" telephone lines known to be overheard by the South Vietnamese the disposition of enemy troops.

The sacking of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong embassies in Pnompenh last Wednesday

followed, and, in the view of the sources, Prince Sihanouk's ouster was the goal that the Prince's opponents had pursued since last summer.

In Paris the next day, Prince Sihanouk said that he believed a coup against him was a possibility, and he suggested that General Lon Nol might lead it.

Firemen Cite Times Story

The top honor in the feature class of the 1969 annual news media contest of the Uniformed Firefighters Association has been won by Leland Schwartz of The New York Times. The award was for an article with photographs dealing with the dangerous rise in false alarms. Published last May 27, the photographs showed boys pulling the alarms and running away,