

Writer Suspects CIA in Cambodia

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(Chronicle correspondent Lisa Hobbs recently completed an assignment in Cambodia, where she had several candid talks with Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the deposed chief of state.)

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It has become part of American folklore to suspect the enthusiastic, if clandestine, presence of the Central Intelligence Agency whenever a Southeast Asian government rises or falls.

The overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and his neutralist government last week might well justify this now customary suspicion.

There is no known evidence that the CIA played any role in the Phnom Penh coup. But the suspicion exists, at least in this writer's mind. Such was Sihanouk's personal popularity that any attempt by his political rivals to depose him would have necessitated foreign support.

REASON

If the CIA were involved, what would have been the rationale? Perhaps it had its genesis in an attitude that the prince expressed to me during a private two-hour interview at his Phnom Penh villa last summer.

"If the Americans withdraw from Southeast Asia, Cambodia can no longer survive as an independent nation," he said. "And, as Khmers, we would prefer the Chinese to the Vietnamese."

Later, the prince spoke of the inevitability of a final Communist takeover of all Vietnam.

The prince was positing a situation that would be intolerable to American Asian policy. With all of Vietnam under Communist control

and Cambodia ruled from Peking, it would be only a matter of time before the American presence would be squeezed out of Thailand.

DANGER

The prince spoke repeatedly of Cambodia being "in perpetual danger" from the Thais in the west and the Vietnamese in the east. Yet it was clear that the prince envisioned no situation that could cause him to relinquish his neutrality by seeking American military aid in the form of combatants.

"Americans should leave Vietnam but stay in all countries that accept their presence. There is no lack of countries like that: they need the U.S. dollar. We are poor but have our pride."

But pride, it seems, was not enough to stay the accelerating internal and external pressures. These pressures sprang from three main sources — the Army which, living on coolie level, has not had a raise in pay since 1954; the politically powerful and personally wealthy rightists within the Sangkum, the ruling party; the increasing political and economic instability throughout Southeast Asia.

CRITICAL

Within the last few weeks, U. S. domestic awareness of American involvement in Laos had reached a peak. Cambodia, sharing borders

News Analysis

with Laos as well as with Thailand and South Vietnam, became overnight a critical strategic prize. In view of the Laotian situation, her neutralist stance might well have become untenable to the three powers that have lusted after her possession for many years.

The die was cast when the

prince left for Paris. In a swift and apparently well-planned maneuver, the government fell into the hands of the pro-American rightists. The prince, long a thorn in the side of U. S. policy-makers, was out.

Was the CIA standing in the wings directing this intriguing little Asian drama? There is no proof. However, the agency puts in such long hours plotting and planning all over Asia it should be given a little credit on the basis of the probable.