

Ouster of Sihanouk Depicted as Almost an Accident

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The overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, the event that thrust another Asian country into the Indochina war, appears to have been almost an accident for everyone concerned.

The full account of how and why Prince Sihanouk fell as Chief of State is still unknown. However, the United States Government and diplomatic sources here have pieced the fragments together and have produced an account of a Cambodian élite that wandered into a coup d'état and of competing outside powers maneuvering toward a climax that none expected.

Apparently Premier Lon Nol and his colleagues did not decide to oust the Prince until one or two days before they formally announced his overthrow on March 18.

While there is a suspicion that some South Vietnamese leaders encouraged the coup, there is no evidence that they knew it was coming. Both the United States and North Vietnam, the two other foreign countries most vitally affected, were apparently surprised and unprepared.

The Soviet Union is said to have offered to fly the Prince back to Pnompenh on the day of the coup in the hope that his presence would reverse events. When he declined, Moscow set about quietly to try to do business with his anti-Communist successors.

Peking Backs Sihanouk

Communist China is thought to have tried to persuade North Vietnam to come to terms with the new Cambodian regime. When it failed, it wound up supporting Prince Sihanouk's government in exile.

Here is the account as it is being recounted by informed sources here:

The Vietnamese are the Cambodians' traditional enemies. Prince Sihanouk decided late in 1963, however, that it would be useful to gain some credit with Hanoi, whose side he believed would win the Vietnam war. Over several years he



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Prince Norodom Sihanouk

permitted the Vietnamese Communists to construct a complex of bases along the Cambodian border with South Vietnam and to open a sea supply route through the port of Sihanoukville, now Kompong Som.

By 1968, these Vietnamese guests were behaving in a fashion the Cambodians had not bargained for. They reorganized and armed the dissident Cambodian Communist movement, the Khmer Rouge, and began using the bases as staging points for assaults on American and South Vietnamese outposts just across the border.

The Cambodian casualties caused by retaliatory allied bombing and shelling and the incitement of the Khmer Rouge so disturbed the Prince and his army that he shut off the Sihanoukville supply route in the spring of 1969.

Last August, economic troubles resulting from the Prince's nationalization policies and unrest over North Vietnamese encroachment forced him to form another government. He named a Cabinet led by an old associate, Lieut. Gen. Lon Nol. It had a basically rightist complexion and was designed to liberalize and stimulate the economy.

In September, Prince Sihanouk went to Hanoi for the funeral of President Ho Chi Minh and extracted a promise of better behavior from the North Vietnamese.

But the North Vietnamese did not change their ways. The Cambodian Army engaged them as well as Khmer Rouge bands in scattered clashes. Shortly before he arrived in France in January for a lengthy visit, the Prince warned that he might have to break off relations with Hanoi and with the provisional revolutionary government of the Vietcong guerrillas.

Sihanoukville Cut Off

Premier Lon Nol once more cut off Sihanoukville to the Vietnamese at the beginning of this year, apparently with the Prince's acquiescence. In February, the provincial governors met with the central Government in Pnompenh and delivered a detailed and alarming account of the extent of Vietnamese penetration throughout the country.

Trying to compel Hanoi to restrict its activities, the Lon Nol Cabinet arranged anti-Vietnamese demonstrations early in March. The Cambodian authorities appear to have lost control over the demonstration in Pnompenh on March 11 and a mob sacked the North Vietnamese and Vietcong Embassies.

Premier Lon Nol and his colleagues are said to have expected the Prince to criticize this violence but to back their underlying aims. Instead, in statements from Paris, he shocked them by denouncing General Lon Nol for alleged pro-American sympathies.

The Prince did not appear to associates to be really expecting a coup. He did, however, make

clear that he would dismiss Premier Lon Nol on his return.

Premier Lon Nol began negotiations with the North Vietnamese on March 13, two days after the sack of the embassies. He opened with a public demand that he apparently regarded as little more than a high bid to start the bargaining—the withdrawal of all of the estimated 60,000 Vietnamese troops from Cambodia within 72 hours. Privately, he indicated a readiness to settle for much less.

The Vietnamese refused to have their activities thus curtailed. They appeared to be stalling on the assumption that Prince Sihanouk's return would restore the old arrangements.

The North Vietnamese representatives reiterated a hard line in a three-hour confrontation with the Cambodians on March 16, demanding reparations and an apology.

It was after this meeting, or the next day, that Premier Lon Nol and his colleagues are said to have decided to depose Prince Sihanouk.

Although there has been speculation that individual United States intelligence agents in Pnompenh may have encouraged the coup, there is no evidence here of a United States Government involvement.

Several days after the March 18 announcement of the Prince's ouster, high officials in Washington were still conjecturing that he had arranged the whole thing as an elaborate sham, another of the maneuvers that the Prince had pursued through 15 years of rule to preserve a precarious neutrality for his country. When they finally recognized his fall, they saw too that the United States as well as Cambodia faced an entirely new situation.