

Cambodia: One Inside Story

By CHARLES MEYER

On August 10, 1969, Prince Sihanouk asked the very reticent General Lon Nol to form a government. This decision by the Cambodian chief of state was surprising. Indeed, for many years, Sihanouk had done his utmost to make Lon Nol a scarecrow for his opposition on the left.

In reality, Sihanouk knew the limitations of his new Prime Minister whom he designated to the outrage of Peking and Hanoi and therefore to the welcome of Washington.

Since the beginning of 1969, Prince Sihanouk had multiplied his attacks on Sino-Vietnamese Communism, presenting it as a new imperialism. This campaign led to a re-establishment of relations with the United States.

On Aug. 13, 1969, on the occasion of the investiture of the Lon Nol Government, the Chamber of Deputies raised for the first time some tabooed questions: extortion, contraband, the Phnompenh gambling casino, the administration of nationalized businesses, and the unemployment of youth. This indictment of the errors and abuses of the regime contained the germ of the future coup.

Until December, 1969, the Cambodian chief of state lived in a sort of dream from which he only emerged Dec. 26 to preside before the National Congress, which he expected to bring about the downfall of a government that was now almost openly hostile. After some mishaps, he could only demonstrate his impotence. A week later, he took a plane for France with the conviction that he would be asked to arbitrate the conflict he was certain would arise between the Assembly and the Government.

In March, Sihanouk decided to return to Cambodia, via Moscow and Peking, where he intended to demand help in getting the evacuation of Vietcong and North Vietnamese bases.

On March 13, a demonstration organized by the Government and the army (at the request of Prince Sihanouk, it is said) ended with the sacking of the Vietcong and North Vietnam embassies. One clique demanded the dismissal of Sihanouk and another favored a compromise.

On the 16th, the anti-Sihanouk group decided to provoke a debate in the National Assembly on the question of confidence in the chief of state. Their plan failed. On the 18th Sihanouk was constitutionally dismissed. The people of Phnompenh accepted the event with indifference.

The C.I.A. was widely accused of having fomented the coup d'état against Prince Sihanouk. In fact, if there was intervention, it was limited to assurances of American support and the pseudo-rallying to Sihanouk by the "free Khmers" of Thailand some

months earlier. It is necessary, nevertheless, to add that U.S. agents have become very active with the new authorities.

Would Prince Sihanouk have been able to conserve his power? Probably if on March 14 he had returned to the capital he would have succeeded in rallying his supporters and avoiding the coup d'état. His great error was to overestimate his charismatic power, of thinking: "They would never dare, and if they dared, all the people would be on my side."

Now "they" dare and during the two or three weeks which followed his downfall, the Cambodian people put their backs up against Sihanouk. And that would have been the outcome even without the massacres, the destruction, the pillage and intervention by the troops of the Saigon regime.

Charles Meyer is a French economist who served as an adviser to Prince Sihanouk and, for a time, to the Lon Nol Government.

Answers by Sihanouk

(Four questions were submitted by cable to Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia in Peking: First, the question of allegations that three members of his Government, Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim and Hou Yuon, now supposedly in Cambodia, are in fact dead; second, whether he proposed to join his forces in the field like Prince Souphanouvong of the Pathet Lao; third, whether he might present the Cambodian question to the United Nations; fourth, what his plans were in event his movement was successful. His answers follow.)

PEKING—In response to your questions, I have the honor of giving the following answers to your great newspaper:

First, Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim, and Hou Yuon never were detained. They rejoined the Communist underground some years ago. They are presently living well in our country and are regularly corresponding with me, and with Penn Nouth, Prime Minister of the Royal Government. Seven vice-ministers, now in Cambodia, have just been named by Penn Nouth on the advice of the three supposedly dead ministers.

These three ministers speak from time to time on the radio of FUNK [the Sihanouk movement]. Those who are married have their wives with them in the liberated zone.

Second, the Laotian Prince Souphanouvong has installed his capital near China and North Vietnam. In order for me to return to Cambodia, I would have to travel through Laos and Vietnam. My Laotian and Vietnamese friends do not dare assume the responsibility of organizing the trip for me given the intense U.S. bombing and still confused military situation in certain zones of Laos, and of Vietnam touching on the frontiers of Cambodia.

On the other hand, the high commander of the Popular Cambodia Army has asked me to exercise patience for a few more months before envisioning my return to Cambodia.

Third, the U.S. intervention in Cambodia to aid the fascist regime of Lon Nol is unjustifiable from the Cambodian point of view. Neither the independence, nor the neutrality, nor the peace of my country were being threatened by the Vietnamese Communists to justify the coup d'état of Lon Nol. Vice President Agnew, in the course of his recent trip in Southeast Asia, confessed that his Government must do everything to help the regime of Lon Nol to survive, this in the interest of the war that the U.S.A. makes on the South Vietnamese people.

That means that your Government turns up their noses at the interests and the lives of the Khmer [Cambodian] people, decimated by your bombs and by a terrible war which will stop as soon as your Government stops aiding the illegal Government of Lon Nol.

Fourth, after the liberation of our country, the present Government of FUNK will be installed in the capital, Phnompenh. In this government, as in the United National Front, there will be Communists, nationalist royalists, non-Communist progressives, etc.

The policy of the Government is, and will be, one of independence and non-alignment.

As for me, I will tender my resignation of the functions of Chief of State to the people who will choose a new Chief of State, and I will retire to France.

Warm and cordial thoughts,
NORODOM SIHANOUK.