

# A Cambodian Leader

Khieu Samphan

By IVER PETERSON

It was characteristic of the early confusion surrounding the insurgency against President Lon Nol's new Cambodian Government in 1970 that there were strong doubts whether one of the reported leaders of the movement, Khieu Samphan, was even alive.

Radio Peking had accused Prince Norodom Sihanouk of having had the slender French-educated economist murdered—by burning him with acid, according to one account—in 1967. Yet four years later, with Prince Sihanouk himself in exile in China after a coup by Marshal Lon Nol, Mr. Khieu Samphan, who is 43 years old, reappeared as one of the insurgency's leaders.

Most recently Khieu Samphan — the name is pronounced cue sam-PAN—has emerged as the most prominent and probably the most powerful member of the little-known group that directed the insurgents against Phnom Penh. He holds the titles of commander in chief of the Cambodian People's National Liberation Armed Forces and of both deputy premier and minister of national defense in the insurgent government headed—in name only, it appears—by Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

The titles may seem to be at odds with what is known of Mr. Khieu Samphan's character and background.

## Father a Civil Servant

He was born on July 27, 1931, in Svay Rieng, a rice-growing community close to the South Vietnamese border on the highway between Phnom Penh and Saigon. His father—like those of many other Asian nationalists and revolutionaries—was a civil servant in the French colonial administration, a position that permitted the son to receive a French education leading to professional training.

As a young man, Mr. Khieu Samphan was known for his studiousness and his quietness. "He was serious," his younger brother, Khieu Seng Kim, recalled. "He studied a lot and did not run around."

While still in high school in the period after World War II, when the Vietnamese guerrillas were fighting a war that was eventually to end French rule in Indochina, Mr. Khieu Samphan was active in anti-French and anti-colonialist movements in Cambodia.

In 1954 he went to the University of Paris to study law and economics. He served as secretary general of the General Union of Khmer Students in France while working on a doctoral dissertation on the crippling effects of the French colonial economy on his country's development. Upon earning his doctorate in 1959 he returned to Phnom Penh.

## Left-Wing Doctrines

Mr. Khieu Samphan then founded a French-language publication, *l'Observateur*, and, as its political director, espoused strongly left-wing positions. His associations with Communism earned him the mistrust of Prince Sihanouk's one-party government, so he was under constant surveillance, suffering occasional arrest and harassment.

In 1960 he was accosted on the street by a group of Sihanouk supporters and stripped to his undershorts, a humiliation that he is said to recall with particular bitterness.

Despite the governmental suspicions he was allowed to run for and win a seat in the National Assembly as a member of Norodom Sihanouk's party, the People's Socialist Community.

After briefly joining the Government as Secretary of state for Commerce, Mr. Khieu Samphan was purged in a reaction against rising prices. Back in the Assembly, he turned increasingly to the political left.

## Final Break in 1967

The final break came on April 24, 1967, when the mercurial Prince publicly denounced him at a Buddhist rally for alleged complicity in a brief peasant revolt in Battambang Province. What followed that day is unclear. It was said that Marshal Lon Nol, then head of the army,



Active in anticolonialist movements since his youth (Khieu Samphan, left, commander of the Cambodian People's National Liberation Armed Forces, with Prince Norodom Sihanouk, during Prince Sihanouk's visit to Communist-held territory in Cambodia in 1973.)

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had Mr. Khieu Samphan arrested and killed or that the Prince arranged his murder and that of two others who are now leaders of the Communist forces, Hu Nim and Hou Yuon.

As events were to show, Mr. Khieu Samphan escaped, perhaps by hiding in the Chinese Embassy and reaching the then-Khmer Rouge—Red Khmer underground.

He had never married and left no family behind. Associates were to say that he considered his political convictions incompatible with marriage and home life.

Once with the rebels Mr. Khieu Samphan evidently put his economic and organizational skills to work to forge both a growing army and the rudiments of an economic base to feed it in the territories under rebel control.

Reports from the Communist zones indicate that he has reorganized agriculture in efforts to produce more rice from land so rich that farmers had exerted only minimal efforts to satisfy family needs.