

Pathet Lao, With Open Facade and Shadowy

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VIENTIANE, Laos, June 8—assuming control of the Laotian governmental structure from the national ministries in Vientiane to the smallest village council.

Last week the Government accepted the concept of joint Pathet Lao-rightist governments in provincial centers and the Pathet Lao have taken over such provinces as Savannakhet and Sayaboury.

Most of the leadership of the complex political, civilian and military organization that is the Pathet Lao dates back 25 years or more in the Indochinese Communist movement.

The Pathet Lao, through its two-tiered organization of the Neo Lao Hak Xat, or Laos Patriotic Front, and the Phak Pasason Lao, or Laos Peoples party, with some 14,000 members, extends its control from a cave headquarters in Samneua near the North Vietnamese border.

From conversations over the last several weeks with Pathet Lao officials in Vientiane, interviews with Western diplomats, some of whom have visited the remote Pathet Lao capital, and intelligence reports, a broad picture emerges of the organization and the personalities that are assuming power.

Control is exercised by a small group of men from a broad spectrum of social classes and background, from royalty to peasantry. But most of them have shared, as have the leaders of most other Asian Communist parties, hardships and privations dating back a quarter of a century, and most have close personal and familial ties to Hanoi.

The most immediately apparent difference is that few Laotians fear the Pathet Lao. There has been none of the talk of bloodbath that preceded the Communist take-over in Cambodia. There was no panicked flight, such as the exodus from Da Nang, when Pathet Lao troops rolled into Savannakhet, the second largest city.

The reason, many Westerners and Laotians here believe, is that at least on the surface, the Pathet Lao holds no mystery. For years, and particularly

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Leadership, Slowly Takes Over

since the formation of the coalition Government more than a year ago, the Pathet Lao has been a daily fact of life in Vientiane and most other areas of the country.

The 'Friendly' Image

It is difficult to fear that friendly young man with the floppy hat and the baggy fatigues, his Chinese-made rifle slung casually over his shoulder, who lounges on your street corner each morning as part of the "Joint Mixed Police."

This is an image that the Pathet Lao has worked hard to cultivate. Yet most analysts here and many top Government officials realize that there is much more to the Pathet Lao than this friendly image, and much more that is still intentionally kept from the public.

It is the leadership—the real party leadership, as opposed to the leadership of the Patriotic Front organization—that is the chief mystery, far more so than the new Cambodian leadership or that in South Vietnam.

The man generally given credit for being the leader of the Pathet Lao is a member of the Laotian Royal family—Prince Souphanouvong. He is the head of the Patriotic Front.

Not in the Pattern

In basic structure, in ideology and particularly in development and history, the Pathet Lao is like most other Asian Communist movements.

But the Pathet Lao diverges from the pattern.

The Prince, now 66 years old, has spent more than 30 years in the Pathet Lao movement and ranks with the oldest and most firmly entrenched members of the top councils. He is a father figure, but he lacks some of the mystique of a Ho Chi Minh, or a Mao

Tse-tung.

It is the Prince who receives foreign dignitaries who want to meet "the head of the Pathet Lao." But it is clear that Prince Souphanouvong is not the key Pathet Lao decision-maker. The Popular Front is designed to

draw within its ranks the broadest possible representation, much as did the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam, but it has no policy-making function.

On the other hand, the Prince is believed to wield more power than does the figurehead Prince Norodom Sihanouk—of the Cambodian Communist movement.

The man generally thought to be the central figure in the Laotian Communist party, who is named repeatedly in the top-level communiqués that issue periodically from Samneua, is Kaysone Phomvihane, the son of the secretary of the old French "resident," or prefect, in Savannakhet.

He has been identified as the secretary general of the Central Committee of the Phak Pasason Lao. He is rarely in public, but intelligence reports and the few visitors who say they have seen him report that his father was a Vietnamese of a relatively upper-class background, though not royal.

New Headquarters Rising

Mr. Kaysone was educated in Hanoi. It was there, during the early days of the Indochinese Communist party, that he became a close friend of the key North Vietnamese politician and military strategist, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, his teacher.

Both Mr. Kaysone and the man generally regarded as No. 2 in the Pathet Lao hierarchy, Neuhak Phoumsavan, have served in the Indochinese Communist movement almost from its beginnings, and certainly

from 1945, when the Laotian Communists began operations.

They suffered through the early privations of cave life in Samneua. They helped build the vast underground Pathet Lao city in the caves at Vang Xeng, on the North Vietnamese border, which withstood extensive American air strikes in the nineteen-sixties.

According to visitors to Samneua and students of Pathet Lao history, the caves are giving way to a new headquarters outside. The leaders themselves have begun to travel throughout the country, recruiting and building a party and governmental organization that reaches into the smallest of villages.

But it is in Vientiane itself, at the national level, that this organization has begun to show its most impressive gains.

The precise goals of the Pathet Lao are still not wholly clear. A Western analyst said: "Like most of the early Asian Communist movements, before they take power, while they still have a broad-based national front organization that is public and a small, hard-core Communist party organization that really runs things, the Pathet Lao has been trying to appeal to the widest range of people and create the fewest enemies. So they have committed themselves on very, very little."

It is apparent that the rhetoric is fundamentally similar to those of the other major Asian Communist movements — denunciation of imperialism and feudalism, adherence to the Leninist doctrine of discipline

as the key to success and a fervent nationalism.

But there are problems here in the nature of Laos itself. There is, for instance, virtually no land-distribution problem, as there was in Vietnam; there is no landlord class that may be painted as the enemy, since, for the sparse population, there is more than enough land.

Army in Firm Hands

As for feudalism, many of the Pathet Lao leaders themselves are members of this feudal class—as lineal members of the royal family. It is difficult to pinpoint real aims beyond an increasing accumulation of power. Unlike the Vietnamese Communists, according to many experts, the Pathet Lao has a relatively low level of literacy, and hence few documents have been captured.

But now that they have begun to take over the bulk of effective power on a national level in Vientiane, it has become increasingly possible to watch them operate.

Less than 2 per cent of the Laotian population even in the so-called liberated zones, are Communist party members—about 14,000, by latest estimates, an uncommonly low figure even for Asian Communist parties. Within the army, which numbers at least 35,000 and by some estimates has as many as 60,000 men the per-

centage of actual party members is not believed to be much higher.

But the direction of the army itself is firmly under the control of the Central Committee, whose chairman, Mr. Kaysone, doubles as Defense Minister and commander of the armed forces.

The lower party officials are carefully chosen, trained and disciplined and have been positioned in the key areas of government and society.

In most cases, the Pathet Lao has been consolidating power "people's courts." Those are little more than ad hoc tribunals, convened on the slim pretext of satisfying the demands of demonstrators within the various ministries for summary justice against "reactionary elements."

Small Coup at Radio Station

The groundwork has been prepared in many cases, however, over far longer periods. A source in the Government radio station said, for instance, that over the last month one worker had gone around "investigating" a large number of people in the key programing department. Suddenly, petitions appeared with workers' signatures asking for ousters.

Quietly, most of those affected took up empty positions behind empty desks in the Information Ministry, their plac-

es at the radio station filled by "friends of the workers."

Individuals with innocuous-sounding titles, such as the "Chef du Cabinet" at the Information Ministry Khamsem Keo are suddenly wielding substantial power in several ministries.

Others at higher levels, including the chief Pathet Lao representative in Vientiane, Sanan Suticha, reportedly a member of the Central Committee, have been moving throughout the country. Mr. Saman was reported to have been in Savannakhet twice recently.

Full Take-Over Disavowed

Throughout all this, the Pathet Lao continues to deny that a full take-over. Dr. Khamsem, who studied medicine in Paris, has said repeatedly that "we respect the accords and the coalition Government and the neutrality of Laos."

On the other hand, it is understood that there are those in the Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Public Works who are already laying plans for Laos's new capital—a new city expected to rise soon on the Plain of Jars. The opening may coincide with the emergence of a full Pathet Lao government.

Both Vientiane and Samneua, it seems, are too close to the borders of other countries and—particularly Vientiane—have become "contaminated."