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Laos Takeover

Set Apart by 'Politeness'

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VIENTIANE, July 6—On the 4th of July, the American embassy here, as is the custom around the world, held a reception. There were little American flags stuck into the canapes, and diplomats and military attaches in starched dress whites wilted in the heat of early evening while the ice melted in their gins.

The pro-Communist Pathet Lao were well represented—quiet and confident now that they have gained almost total control over the coalition government of Laos. The Pathet Lao are gradually carrying out their own revolution with a minimum of violence and coercion. Compared with Vietnam and Cambodia, there is a certain politeness in the manner in which the Laotian Communists are taking their country back after nearly a century of foreign domination.

For 10 years, the United States supported and organized a civil war to prevent what is happening today. There is naturally some bitterness among the Pathet Lao, but Friday they came to toast the 199th anniversary of America's independence.

The embassy that once numbered more than a thousand official Americans at the height of the war is now down to 22. A few days ago, faced with continual harassment and occupation of embassy property by militant students whom the government seemed unwilling to censure, it looked as if America's last embassy in Indochina might have to close down altogether.

But only hours before the

reception began, the Lao government turned the students out of an U.S. information service library in a gesture that was seen here as conciliatory. The Americans are no longer under the impression that the Lao Government might be trying to get rid of them all.

Whatever remains in the way of an American presence here, however, will never resemble the American mission that so dominated the political life of this country during the war. In those days, the American embassy telephone book was thicker than the telephone book for all of Laos, and the size of the embassy guard force rivaled the Vientiane police.

The AID mission, which was recently closed following anti-American demonstrations, the CIA operatives that organized and directed clandestine armies in the hills and the American pilots who supplied them are all gone.

The embassy parking areas now look like used car lots filled with the vehicles of quickly departed American diplomats. Nervous businessmen are selling off their inventories at half the cost it took to import them, and some of the richer people in Vientiane, and those with relatives across the river, have crossed the Mekong River into Thailand.

With Presbyterian ire, the Pathet Lao are beginning to crack down on the decadence and Western influence that was the old Vientiane. The White, Rose, once among the grubbiest cabarets in Southeast Asia, has packed up its sex shows and closed its bar on the orders of the

government.

Other enterprises have closed for lack of business. The Quick Snack Bar has a "for sale" sign on the door and the old Purple Porpoise is no more. Jean Pierre, "le tailleur unisex," is still open for business but no one gives him long.

Vientiane, a shabby town even in the best times, is dying economically. Without continued foreign aid, businessmen and bankers agree, the economy will collapse.

But the Pathet Lao say they are working on something more important—to restore the pride of the Laotian people after nearly a hundred years of foreign dominance. The Pathet Lao say that Western influence and materialism has broken down the traditional cohesiveness of Laotian society and degraded Laotian culture. They hope to restore the traditional qualities of Lao village life.

They say they want foreign aid and would even accept technical assistance and experts if they were offered, but it has to be on their terms. The Pathet Lao forced the U.S. AID mission to close because of its military activities during the war. Many Laotians looked upon the aid mission as "a body managing the Lao government," as Vice Premier Phoumi Vongvichit has said.

Most of the right-wing generals and ministers have fled the country, and there is anxiety and, among some of the middle-class, fear of what the future will bring. But there is no real fear of the conquering Communists among the common people of Vientiane comparable to that in Saigon or Phnom Penh before they fell. People have seen the Pathet Lao around town since the coalition was formed in 1973.

There are even middle-class people who concede that the old corrupt society failed Laos completely, and that the dependence on the Americans was a mistake that in the long run brought them naught. Many people agree with the old neutralist premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, who told the country recently that the time had come for Laos to make "an accord with history" and accept the inevitable.

For when the Pathet Lao began to push for control shortly after the collapse of Saigon,

the old right wing here collapsed completely, and the Pathet Lao simply rolled into all the Vietiane side's river towns. Only in Vientiane and the royal capital of Luang Prabang is the illusion of a coalition maintained.

One group that has found it difficult to accept an accord with history are the Meo hill people who, because of their marital qualities and because they lived in the mountains of northeastern Laos where they

could harass the Communists, were used by the CIA as the cutting edge of the CIA's clandestine army.

Their leader, Vang Pao, has fled the country, and although many of the Meo clans turned against Vang Pao and chose to remain, some 20,000 have crossed the border into Thailand. Thousands more were prevented from leaving and are roaming through the Laotian mountains looking for a place where they can be left alone.

The Pathet Lao are widely respected for their nationalism and their stand against corruption. They respect the monarchy and call themselves the defenders of the Buddhist religion. The old Vientiane officials, policemen and civil servants have not been arrested or killed—they have simply been required to volunteer for re-education sessions. In short, the Communist takeover here has been surprisingly mild and very Laotian. There are those who wonder how long it can last.

There are already reports seeping through from the reports are impossibly harsher regime there with arrests and even killings. The reports are impossible to confirm because travel out of the capital is restricted. But the French military mission here, a hold-over from the Geneva agreement of 1954, has visited the south and found a climate of fear unknown here in Vientiane.

The Pathet Lao Central Committee just concluded a meeting in Sam Neua, and Thursday it was announced that three Pathet Lao ministers in the coalition government, ministers who were believed to be moderates,

were going abroad for extended rest and hospitalization. It is known that two of the ministers, Foreign Minister and Vice Premier Phoumi Vongvichit and Information Minister Souk Vongsak, are suffering from heart trouble. The third, Public Works Minister Soth Petrasy, says he simply needs a vacation. But the timing of the three extended leaves, and the indications that their places will be taken by harder, less-compromising men—perhaps more under the influence of Hanoi—has caused apprehension here.

A civil servant probably spoke for most Vientiane residents when he said: "If we must have communism here, I hope it will be Laotian communism and not Vietnamese communism."