

Indochina's New Rulers

Nearly 6 Months After the Take-Overs, Lines of Power Just Begin to Emerge

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BANGKOK, Thailand, Oct. 1 — With the quiet departure of Prince Norodom Sihanouk back into the exile in Peking that has been his way of life for more than five years, an uncertain stillness has descended again over the Cambodian capital. The quiet raises questions of leadership and power in all three of the Indochinese capitals that were taken over this year by Communist governments — Saigon, Vientiane and Phnom Penh.

Nearly six months after the Communist take-overs, the issues of who is in charge, what form the new governments are taking, and how power is really exercised are only beginning to be clarified.

What is clear now in Cambodia, to begin, is that Prince Sihanouk's role will be decidedly secondary in any future political alignment in Cambodia and in turn in Cambodia's alignments in Southeast Asia.

Following a brief flurry of exultant reports on lavish banquets for the Prince and Princess Monique by the new Cambodian leaders, and a descrip-

tion of a Cabinet meeting over which the Prince "presided," Cambodia's propaganda organs dropped him as though he had never existed.

Daily broadcasts continued to talk of the progress of Cambodian workers in agriculture and irrigation and in the reopening of industry but without mentioning the revered Prince.

Even his departure for Peking was ignored by the Phnom Penh radio. It was left to Peking radio to announce to Cambodians in a Khmer-language broadcast that their leader had departed.

Behind him remained a three-man leadership that most Western observers here believe is still engaged in an internal struggle.

This weekend, the leaders were again reassembled in Phnom Penh as Ieng Sary, the Deputy Premier in charge of foreign affairs, returned to the capital to join his fellow Deputy Premiers, Khieu Samphan and Son Sen, who recently received the powerful defense portfolio. The titular Premier, Penn Nouth, an ailing 70-year-old holdover from the days preceding the reign of Marshal Lon Nol, is, like Prince Sihanouk, considered a figurehead.

"Of the three deputies there, Ieng Sary is the most visible," said one Western expert on Cambodia, "but all that means is that he probably has less power. The rule of thumb in Indochina these days is the more visible you are, the less power you seem to have."

New Aide for Sihanouk

Perhaps for this reason, Mr. Ieng Sary, after his trips to Lima, Peru for a third-world parley, and the United Nations, seems to have given up his previous role as Prince Sihanouk's shadow. Instead, a new member of the central committee of the Communist movement, Keat Chhon, was being mentioned all weekend as accompanying Prince Sihanouk to the functions in Peking.

A similar leadership puzzle

persists in Saigon, where level upon level of government emerged in the days following the April take-over by the Communists.

While a single administration appears to be running the Cambodian Government with the sole question being which man is on top, in Saigon the question seems to be which government is on top.

There appears to be a central government called the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Its head now as in the days before the Communist victory, is Huynh Tan Phat, a nominally neutralist lawyer who is known as the President of South Vietnam.

"But like all things there now that seem to be what they are not, Phat is simply not the ruler of South Vietnam," said a Western expert on Vietnam. "It really is all being done with mirrors."

The real ruler of South Vietnam seems to be one of the most powerful members of the nine-man North Vietnamese Politburo, Pham Hung. Intelligence reports say he outranks even the legendary military genius, Vo Nguyen Giap. For years Mr. Hung headed the Communists' Central Office of South Vietnam.

Mr. Hung has no title in the Saigon Government. While it is unclear how he exercises his power, it is apparent that he is No. 1. It was Mr. Hung, for instance, who headed the delegation from South Vietnam for the 30th celebration of Independence Day in Hanoi early last month.

While there is a Provisional Revolutionary Government, a Cabinet and all the trappings of a central administration, and while there seems to be at least one senior official through which orders are all funneling, namely Mr. Hung, most major day-to-day operations in Saigon are being handled by the Military Management Committee, yet another level of government created after the fall of the Nguyen Van Thieu regime.

Change Indicated

Last weekend, Saigon radio hinted that the Military Management Committee, headed by a senior Vietcong military official, Tran Van Tra, might soon be replaced by a truly civilian government.

What this means is not clear, since in late July, South Vietnam announced the formation of a civilian government for the capital that included a number of minor members of the old non-Communist opposition to



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Prince Norodom Sihanouk

the Thieu government.

"We are still waiting to see how all these networks tie together and who precisely is giving the orders and who is carrying them out," one Western expert, said today.

It seems that the Provisional Revolutionary Government and the civilian city government are simply front organizations and that it is still such individuals as Mr. Hung military officers who are running South Vietnam with direction from Hanoi every step of the way.

There is a military management committee for every major city in South Vietnam. One strong theory advanced here is that Mr. Hung and his apparatus are tying them all together from the top in Saigon.

Problems Held Possible

Many here believe that the persistence of these military management committees, originally intended as transitional devices, could indicate that serious political and economic problems still exist in South Vietnam.

A two-level government also appears to be ruling in Laos, where the nominal head of government, Premier Souvanna Phouma, has become virtually powerless with the Government being run by Pathet Lao ministers. They in turn seem to be taking orders from the hidden leadership in a remote headquarters on the North Vietnamese border.

This leadership includes Kay-sone Phomvihane, secretary-general of the Phak Paksason Lao, or Lao People's party, and his top aide, Neuhak Phoumsavan, men who rarely emerge from their mountain headquarters.

As in Vietnam, there is also a front organization in Laos, the Neo Lao Hak Xat, or Popular Front, headed by Prince Souphavoung. He, like the leaders of the front groups in South Vietnam, wields little power but is seen more frequently in public.

"Eventually, we believe, all three governments will assume an orderly, rather traditional shape," one Western expert said. "Cambodia is probably the closest so far—at least there is only one government. And in Vietnam we may not see any single structure emerge until the unification with North Vietnam. But again, that, too, has to come sooner or later."