

Learning to Love the Pathet Lao

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VIENTIANE—Hundreds of thousands of Laotians are being "reeducated" into believing that the brand of communism now taking root in their country is not the dreaded bogey they had been led to fear.

In this administrative capital, in the royal city of Luang Prabang 130 miles north of here, and in many other towns and villages, just about everyone is going to what have become known in Lao as "saminah," seminars designed to get their thinking into line with Communist

Party doctrine.

To the surprise of even some of the more skeptical, a lot of what they are taught seems to make sense to them. There is heavy emphasis on anti-Americanism. "President Johnson was brutal, with a cowboy mentality. President Nixon was a gangster" - which generally draws cheers.

But greater stress is laid on the need for national pride and self-determination. This stirs a long-dormant spark in many Laotians, particularly the young.

"The Pathet Lao are genuine patriots," said a 25-year-old office clerk who has

been attending seminars in Luang Prabang for the past two weeks. "They want to teach us pride in ourselves and our country, something we never had under the old regime."

A 28-year-old graduate student at Dong Dok Teachers' College, a graceful structure built by the U.S. Agency for International Development in Vientiane, echoed the sentiment.

"There's no doubt in my mind that they're sincerely interested in improving the lives of the common people," he said. "That's more than you could ever have said for

the previous government."

The graduate student expressed admiration for what he termed the "scientific" approach the Pathet Lao took at his seminars. He said he attends daily, sometimes for eight hours at a stretch.

"Each seminar is tailored to the educational level of the people attending," he said. "They lay out their arguments and then meticulously go about proving them. I don't agree with everything they say, but I must confess I've been convinced about a great deal."

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"We've been taught that dissent wastes time," he said, "and we have no more time to waste. The old democracy was so liberal, it was near-anarchy. Now, we have to reach popular decisions, and then no one can differ any more. If we discuss things too long, we never get anything done. This is the new democracy."

This student does not seem to be made of the stuff of revolutionaries. Delicately built, with a deeply receding hairline and soft brown eyes, he holds down a full-time job to support himself in graduate school. He lives at home with his 68-year-old mother and drives a shuddering old car he bought several years ago.

To protect himself and his

mother, he agreed to discuss his seminars only if his name was withheld.

When radical young students raided the compound of the U.S. Agency for International Development last spring and eventually forced AID to leave Laos, he was appalled. "They think it's exciting being part of a revolution," he told a foreign correspondent at that time. "They don't understand what Communism is all about."

Now, he himself admits to misunderstanding the Communist Pathet Lao, or simply "the Pathet," as most French- or English-speaking Laotians call them.

For one thing, he said, there appears to be room in the Pathet Lao doctrine for private enterprise and in-

dividual ownership of property. "They tell us that country needs trade," he said, "and they tell us they'll never chase us out of the cities into communes, as the Khmer Rouge have done in Cambodia." He noted that the Khmer Rouge "entered Phnom Penh as a conquering army, while the Pathet entered Vientiane as welcomed heroes." But the seminars left no doubt that all Laotians, city people and peasants, would have to see things differently from now on.

"The Pathet tell us that to argue that the people resent having socialism — they never call it Communism — rammed down their throats implies that we're losing a form of government in which we had a real voice," he said. "But we never did have a say. Now, we're getting real democracy for the first time."

The student conceded readily that under this new system he wasn't free to argue with the Pathet, even on some minor points with which he disagreed.

"At first," he said, "I thought this was fabricated democracy. But the Pathet have convinced me this is what the nation wants."

"If the Lao People's Revolutionary party didn't

have this kind of democratic agreement, they'd have spent all their time discussing instead of taking action against the American planes."

Although the student said he is convinced that the Pathet Lao have more right answers for the country than the U.S.-backed rightists ever did, he confessed to being bothered by some lingering questions that had gone unanswered.

Once, he said, his instructor — a man with a French university doctorate in political science who had spent years in the jungle with the Communists — told the seminar that the Soviet Union, employing Marxist-Leninist techniques, produces more food than the imperialist United States.

"During the break I told a friend of mine that this was not so," he said. "I know the Soviet Union has a chronic food deficit and has to buy wheat from the United States."

"I don't know if my friend reported me, but later in the seminar the instructor referred to this again and said that we would have to learn to see the truth. This means we must believe certain things we're told simply because socialist doctrine has triumphed and is now in a very strong position."