

# Pathet Lao Seek Unity in

By Lewis M. Simons

Washington Post Foreign Service

**LUANG PRABANG, Laos**—Years of hostility and propaganda have built a formidable barrier between Laotians living in what were until a few months ago Communist and non-Communist sectors of the country.

The central task of the Pathet Lao leadership appears to be to remove these barriers and mold the 3 million people of this charmingly backward and sleepy kingdom into a purposeful unit, committed to Communism and nationalism.

The nationwide program of reeducation seminars, organized with an efficiency surprising to foreigners familiar with Laos before the Pathet Lao takeover, is designed to drive home the lessons of unity and commitment.

Although there is armed resistance from Meo hill tribesmen in the Long Tieng valley and some 50,000 Meo and lowland Lao have fled to Thailand, the overwhelming majority of those former rightist followers who remain behind appear to be learning their lessons well.

But those who have lived in what the Pathet Lao for years called the "liberated" zones are still reluctant to accept those who have been living in rightist-ruled zones.

Those few residents of Luang Prabang who have been granted special permission to travel to long-time Communist-held areas report that they are met with suspicion and often outright hostility.

A businessman who sells hardware and dry goods in this misty, hill-ringed royal capital said that he had recently traveled up the Mekong River to a long-time liberated area to visit relatives and try to sell some merchandise.

"My relatives, whom I

haven't seen for 10 or 15 years, were happy to see me," the businessman said quietly over coffee in a small deserted cafe one evening recently. "But when I asked them how their life was under the Pathet, whether they felt free to speak their minds, what their

economic conditions were, they refused to answer me."

He said his relatives told him they had been warned by local Pathet Lao leaders that Luang Prabang and Vientiane were still "infested" with U.S. Central Intelligence Agency operatives and they must be careful about what they said to their relative. "I think they honestly believed I was a spy," he said.

Other Luang Prabang residents said one technique is being used to introduce former protagonists to each other. They said some people are sent to long-time liberated areas where they work and live with Communist villagers.

"No one is forced to go,"

said one young man, speaking to a foreign journalist at the one remaining nightclub in Luang Prabang. "But anyone without a job is invited to go to the countryside and grow rice. The Pathet give them food for three months. After that, they may return to town or, if they prefer, they may stay on."

This young man, a university graduate able to speak French and English, said he opposed the Pathet Lao. But when questioned closely, most of his complaints were minor ones. In the end, he conceded that what he disliked most was the closing of night spots where young people could dance and listen to western music.

"I'm sure they're going to

close down this place anytime now," he said as he lounged on straw mats in the establishment called "The House on the Lake." It is a chain of lovely thatch-roofed huts set in a lily pond and linked together with bamboo catwalks.

As he spoke, a French high school teacher strummed an American folk song on a guitar and a sarong-clad waitress served beer and papaya milkshakes. "The Pathet tell us we throw away our money on nothing here," the young man said with a smile.

This and other homely lessons are taught at the seminars, which just about everyone in this town of about 40,000 attends. They are held

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## Suspicion

in schools, police stations, in the houses of village headmen, and are attended by as many as 150 people at one time.

"There's almost always a seminar going on somewhere in town, except at the royal palace," joked a young woman who works for a French-owned firm. "Maybe the king takes private lessons." The future of the monarchy, a touchy subject in this ancient royal city, is never referred to directly by the Pathet Lao instructors, she added.

Instead, the seminars focus on the emergence of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party as the driving force behind the Laotian Communist revolution, eclipsing the Lao

Patriotic Front which held the spotlight for years.

The party strongman is clearly Kaysone Phomvihane, who until recently was known principally for his second-place role in the Front behind figurehead Chairman Prince Souphanouvong. Kaysone operates from Pathet Lao headquarters at Vieng Xai near the North Vietnamese border and has not been to the administrative capital in Vientiane in recent memory.

But his name is mentioned with increasing frequency at all levels of seminars, whether they are simple memorizing sessions for eight-year-old children, manual labor camps for former right-wing army and police officers, or

"scientific" courses for university students.

Although life in Laos can in no way be compared with the reported harshness of neighboring Cambodia, it seems clear that there will be as little need here for King Savang Vatthana as there is for Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia.

Prince Souphanouvong is still retained as chairman of the Front because the Pathet Lao know large numbers of Laotians respect him for his royal link. But the seminars are preparing the people of Laos for a no-nonsense leadership of hard-line Marxist-Leninists, and the days of Laos' royalty are certainly numbered.

Although the country's official name remains "The Kingdom of Laos," seminar lecturers refer only to "Laos." While there has been no official announcement of a new national flag, the revolutionary Pathet Lao flag, a white circle on blue and red stripes, has all but replaced the white and red three-headed elephant banner, the symbol of the "kingdom of a million elephants."

"There'll probably never be an announcement," said a graduate student in Vientiane, the administrative capital. "It's not the Lao way. One day, we'll realize that the flag and the king are gone. And that will be that."